



Why Every Professional Needs to Master Presentation Skills

Why don't many professionals get the respect they deserve?

Think about it carefully. Whose responsibility is it to recognize your value as a professional – no matter what industry you're in?

It's yours. This requires the ability to sell.

Now, ask yourself this question: "Am I in sales?" *All* hands should be raised.

Although there are times you must share specific information -- i.e. perhaps a sales presentation or policy update -- ***your overall responsibility is to sell ... your ideas, your concepts and your value.***

What does it take for any professional to successfully communicate his or her message? It doesn't matter whether you are giving information to a client -- or to a larger audience of shareholders – good presentation skills are vital to your success.

Test Your Presentation Skills

There are many myths and realities about presenting like a pro. Take our 15-question True or False quiz below, and read more about the areas you need to improve upon to build your speaking prowess.

True or False Quiz:

- 1) **Knowing your subject well -- being a content expert -- is the same as being an effective speaker.**
- 2) **The purpose of most presentations is to inform.**
- 3) **All audiences are the same.**
- 4) **The time of day you are speaking should not affect how you put together your presentation.**
- 5) **Incorporating many facts and figures will be riveting to your audience.**
- 6) **People are more influenced by logic than they are by emotions.**



- 7) Once you've finished your PowerPoint slides, you are done creating the presentation.
- 8) "I'm pleased to be with you here to discuss...." and, "Today, I'm here to talk about ..." are both effective speech openings.
- 9) You need to memorize your presentation to deliver it well.
- 10) Having butterflies in your stomach, or feeling nervous before you present, means you are doomed to fail.
- 11) Lack of passion can kill good content.
- 12) Using acronyms and jargon will make you look smart.
- 13) If your content is good, your visual impact won't matter.
- 14) Complimenting an audience member's question is a good move.
- 15) "More people have talked their way up the ladder of success than have gotten there any other way."

Now, let's look at the answers:

- 1) **Knowing your subject well -- being a content expert -- is the same as being an effective speaker.**

FALSE – Although knowing your subject is critical, it doesn't ensure your ability to speak about it in a way that resonates with the audience.

You can probably think of a few of your teachers or professors who truly were subject matter experts – but either bored you to death, or were totally confusing. To speak well, you need to plan, prepare and practice.

- 2) **The purpose of most presentations is to inform.**

FALSE – Whether you realized it or not, the primary purpose of most presentations is to persuade – selling your ideas, concepts or get buy-in for a proposal.

Even if you are giving informative presentations, you want the audience to accept the information and your credibility as valid.

As presenters, we always need to keep our purpose in mind. What do you want your audience members to know, feel or do when they leave your presentation? Without this clarity, typically nothing



happens. With a specific end result in mind, you will be more able to outline and develop your presentation more easily.

Being clear about the purpose of your presentation will help you prepare the right information to get your message across and keep you focused. Remember, whether you are there to inform or persuade, you still need to be motivating.

3) All audiences are the same.

FALSE -- Not all audiences are the same, and knowing details about these individuals is critical.

The message you deliver is not always the one that is received. This can happen for many reasons, including not understanding your audience members and their demographics, and their preferred method of communication.

When you give a presentation, you have to be conveying some value to audience members, remembering to answer their unspoken WIIFM question: “What’s In It For Me?”

But, as a presenter, what can YOU get from the audience? The answer is *plenty*. Presenting information is not a one-way interaction. It doesn't matter what you are trying to sell or what information you are relating. Whether it's widgets or watermelons, annual company performance data or a new HR initiative, we all face the same challenge -- connecting with our audience/customers and getting our message across.

Even seasoned professional speakers sometimes forget to do all their homework and wind up looking foolish or losing a sale. There have been numerous examples of speeches given with information that was either too far above or too far below the knowledge level of the audience.

You want to ask yourself: Who is in the audience? Are they colleagues, senior management, or clients? Why are they there? What are their demographics (age, gender, nationality, etc.). What is their attitude toward your objective? Who are the decision makers and who are the influencers? What knowledge do they have and do they need? The “right” information to the wrong audience limits your chance of achieving your objectives.

Where and when can you learn about your audience? Before the presentation, you can talk to others that have spoken to the group, and ask the right questions of the person who invited you to present – or, better yet, chat with some of the attendees. This type of advance preparation helps you customize the material and organize content.

Arrive early at the presentation; observe and talk to people. This is a good opportunity to make last minute changes. Never forget what Yogi Berra said: “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.” In other words, if your



presentation isn't going well, change course. Doing a proper audience analysis and coming with the attitude of "serving" your listeners, will enhance your chance for success.

4) The time of day you are speaking should not affect how you put together your presentation.

FALSE -- Knowing the logistics of your meeting in advance can save you a lot of grief later.

Time of day matters. After all, if it's right after lunch, do you want the lights out and slides on? No way!

The amount of time for the presentation is also important. If you are given 30 minutes, don't cram in 40 minutes of information, and talk fast. If there is going to be questions and interaction, cut the "lecture" part of your presentation.

The other logistics to consider are: Are you part of a team or panel of speakers? What will the other speakers be discussing? How large is the audience? What visual equipment is available? The answers to these questions are crucial factors in helping you tailor your presentation

If you will be using visual aids, be certain you have the proper equipment including replacement bulbs, extra extension cords or anything else that might botch your presentation if missing. Be sure to arrive early to get comfortable with the room setup, and your equipment.

5) Incorporating only facts and figures will be riveting to your audience.

FALSE -- While this may be true, depending on the statistics and information being shared, presentations are more than just facts and figures.

What makes a presentation more memorable?

Analogies and metaphors, stories, humor, examples, audience-involvement techniques, case studies, and visual aids to support the facts and figures.

While preparing, ask yourself, "What is the point I want to make? Now, what can I add that makes the point stick?"

6) People are more influenced by logic than they are by emotions.

FALSE – Hitting the emotional buttons will create more impact and action than logic or pure data.

Aristotle, the father of all public speaking, said that all speaking is persuasive.



In order to do that, you need to impact people in three different ways (he called these modes of proof).

Logos – translated into “logic,” is first. The goal is to hit the head – make people think. You do that by organizing your ideas in a logical framework, and by giving information that is more logical. Facts and figures can fit into this category.

If your goal is to inform, logos is the primary mode of proof. However, if your goal is to influence thinking, or get action, you need to add the **Pathos**. This includes the emotional material that hits the heart and gut. Stories and examples are a great way to include emotion.

The information you incorporate into your presentation needs to include logos and pathos.

Aristotle also talked about **Ethos**: credibility. Your credibility and reputation will be critical in influencing others. If we like and trust you, we will be more open to your ideas. If we don't, your chances of success are limited.

Bottom line – things haven't changed much since Aristotle's time. The best presentations you have heard are the ones that include both logic and pathos, and are delivered by a person you respect (ethos).

7) Once you've finished your PowerPoint slides, you are done creating the presentation.

FALSE – While PowerPoint & other visual aids can be used in a presentation, they are not the basis for your speech, and speakers shouldn't be too dependent on them.

Understand that PowerPoint slides are not the presentation (or shouldn't be!). They should be an aid to the presentation. After all, if everything is on a slide – why not just hand it out, and answer questions?

If too much is on a slide, people will be reading, not listening. Write your presentation, and see where a visual will add value.

Here are some overall pointers to remember when it comes to effective use of visual aids:

- Make sure everything is spelled correctly.
- Check the room setup and equipment availability before preparing your visual aids.
- If possible, practice using the visuals on site.
- Arrive early on the day of your presentation, to have adequate time to set up your equipment and ensure it works.
- If renting or borrowing equipment, ensure that you are familiar with it before your presentation.



- Make sure your power pack is fully charged, or new batteries have been installed on your laptop.
- Bring duplicate copies of slides on a memory stick or CD.
- If possible, use a remote control with a “blinking button” that allows you to blank the screen (same function as the “B” key on the keyboard), making the visual disappear.
- Keep the screen to the speaker’s left. Since we read from left to right, it makes it easier for the audience members to see.
- Be prepared to speak without visual aids, just in case!

It’s important to remember that visual aids should not be your notes or relate every idea that you are talking about. Instead the visual aid is best used when it relates key points or concepts to remember. Short statements or sentences – and, better yet, graphics -- that help audience members remember and act upon your message are especially good to use.

Ultimately, the best thing to do is use a combination of the low-tech and high-tech visual aid options – allowing you to connect better with audience members and keep their attention riveted on you.

8) “I’m pleased to be with you here to discuss....” and “Today, I’m here to talk about ...” are both effective speech openings.

FALSE -- Both are bad examples of introductions.

The goal of an introduction is to set a tone, get the audience ready and interested in the presentation, and for the speaker to create a rapport.

By the time the introduction is over (approximately 10 to 15% of the total presentation time), the audience members will have decided whether they want to sit through the talk, and if there is anything in it for them. It’s amazing how often the audience members use their personal “remote” and push the “mute” button, tuning you out.

To avoid this happening, use this formula for introductions:

Grabber/Attention Statement: Immediately start with a story, statistic, example, a real or rhetorical question. Something that breaks their attention and pulls them in.

Even at a routine weekly meeting, you could say, “Remember at last week’s meeting, we ...”

After the initial opening, be sure to give the “WIIFT?” – What’s In It For Them. After all, they are saying “WIIFM?” – What’s In It For Me? Don’t assume that everyone will identify the value – it’s your job as the speaker to give the audience members a reason to listen.



Next, introduce yourself – if necessary. If everyone knows you or you have an introducer, there is no need. Of course, if you are being introduced, write your own introduction, and give it (in advance) to the introducer. If the audience knows you, but doesn't know your qualifications to speak about this topic – include that aspect to enhance your credibility.

Finally, you can go over the agenda, ground rules, and let people know when they can ask questions.

By the time the introduction is done, the audience members will know what to expect, who you are, and the value to them. The problem with the introductions in question # 8 is that they are created around the speaker, rather than the audience. "I am pleased ..." who cares?!? "I am here today to talk about ..." generally, they already know, and besides, it is boring.

Since the audience members remember what they hear first and last, spend time crafting your introduction. Of course, write the body of the speech first. Then, step back, and ask yourself, "Who cares?" "What is the hook?"

Spend as much time preparing the conclusion. Audience members remember what they hear first and last (primary – recency). The conclusion includes a review of the key points, and then a memorable close ("Thank you" isn't memorable!).

A story, a quote, challenge for the future, call to action, or referring to your opening, are all good ways to end. Even if the news you are giving is bad, you must end with hope.

9) You need to memorize your presentation to deliver it well.

FALSE – It is fine to memorize the framework and flow, but few people can memorize a script and then sound spontaneous.

The best way to ensure effective delivery of your presentation is to create a user-friendly final draft, and then practice using it.

Peter Drucker said, "Spontaneity is an infinite number of rehearsed possibilities." Of course, each practice session can be different, which ultimately makes you more flexible and spontaneous.

There is nothing wrong with using notes, as long as you aren't reading them. As Winston Churchill said when he was asked why he carried notes but seldom used them, "I carry fire insurance, but I don't expect my house to burn down." Use bulleted points instead of sentences. Make the type easy to read (use felt-tip pen or minimum 18-point type, boldface, if typed), only use the top 2/3 of the page to avoid looking down, use highlight pens to indicate the must/should/could know information.



Professionals in all fields practice. If you want to be comfortable, flexible, and audience-centered, it will take practice.

10) Having butterflies in your stomach, or feeling nervous before you present, means you are doomed to fail.

FALSE – Consider stage fright just a negative term for excitement.

No sports coach tells his or her team to be calm.

Channel the adrenaline you may feel before a presentation into enthusiasm. You can control the physical symptoms of stage fright by breathing from the diaphragm, using positive visualization and self talk, by being prepared and practiced.

What if you're fairly confident with your content, but still dread the upcoming presentation?

First, you need to rest assured that you are NOT alone. You are one of the millions of people who are frightened to speak in public. Whether it is your first presentation, or number 1,000, almost everyone suffers from some level of stage fright or performance anxiety.

Although studies have shown that the fear of speaking in public ranks ahead of death, flying, heights, and snakes, this fear can be controlled. It's a form of energy that can be channeled to your benefit. But, first you must identify these feelings.

There are five common fears that many speakers have:

1) Fear of your mind going blank. We have all seen this happen to others, and you need to learn what to do if it happens to you: Pause, look at your notes or outline and try to pick up again where you left off, or move on to your next thought. Do your preparation, and practice.

2) Fear of showing various physical signs of stage fright, including nervousness, trembling, the shakes and turning red. Practice helps. Using gestures gets rid of trapped energy. Use humor to relax. Do your preparation, and practice.

3) Someone challenges you and you don't know the answer. It's OK to not know an answer to a question. Just remember: NEVER lie. Be honest, and tell the person you will get back to him or her as soon as possible with an answer, and then follow up as promised. Anticipate the questions, so you are prepared. Do your preparation, and practice.

4) The audience members think you don't know enough about the subject. If you have backed up your material with facts and figures, and anecdotes to illustrate your points, this shouldn't be a problem. Do your preparation, and practice.



5) A bad presentation will ruin your reputation. Rarely. We all have bad days and make mistakes. Most often what you believe to be a major faux pas or a poorly received speech, wasn't as awful as you think. A sincere presenter doing his or her best, who is obviously well prepared, will not be judged harshly. Again, do your preparation, and practice.

One effective way to control stage fright is by using visualization. In the visualization process, you picture yourself in front of an audience. You are composed, confident and in control. By picturing yourself in a successful situation, you are able to give yourself the confidence you need to achieve your goal.

There are four basic techniques to follow, which will make controlling stage fright and performance-related fears easier.

- Arrive early. This will give you a chance to relax, do some stretching and breathing exercises, survey your surroundings, make a trip to the restroom, organize your thoughts, and check the facilities -- as well as any equipment you may be using -- and, most importantly, talk to the audience members as they enter the room. The speaker who rushes in at the last minute does himself or herself a disservice.
- Eat lightly. Avoid heavy meals. This also means no alcohol, milk products, or carbonated drinks. Bananas are a good choice; they are light and filling. It is also important to avoid taking decongestants or other medications that might make you drowsy.
- Use humor to help release endorphins. Laughter is a great tension reliever. You can also use interactive techniques. When you begin your presentation, plan to ask audience members a question and get them to raise their hands. This will take some of the focus off of you and put it onto them.
- Other ways to help you relax before your presentation include trying simple stretching and breathing exercises, and visualizing success.

These techniques, along with proper preparation and practice, will alleviate most stage fright symptoms. The most important thing is to remember it's not about you. Focus on connecting the audience with the material. You are the medium to get that across.

11) Lack of passion can kill good content.

TRUE – When you deliver content with passion, it's amazing how well you will do.

Enthusiasm can be contagious. If your voice is expressive and your gestures animated, you will appear to be confident and passionate.



How can you get a crowd of hungry or tired audience members interested in your presentation? How can you stand apart and be remembered out of a series of speakers? How can your presentation close a sale or convince someone to take action?

If you have ever listened to people speaking in a monotone, you know how difficult it is to pay attention. Vary your pitch, volume and rate. Emphasize the key ideas and use pauses for punctuation.

It is also important to speak clearly and enunciate. If you rush your delivery or speak softly, the audience will have to work too hard to pay attention. Vary your tone and speed, and tailor your delivery rate to accommodate any regional differences.

Speak with passion – it sells ideas.

12) Using acronyms and jargon will make you look smart.

FALSE – Jargon or acronyms may just confuse your audience members; or, worse yet, make them feel stupid if they don't understand the terminology.

Do you finish a presentation only to find quizzical looks on audience members' faces? Or, worse yet, yawns of boredom while you speak?

Perhaps you have fallen victim to poor verbal judgment, including overuse of jargon and buzzwords. The goal is to use clear, simple language. The audience shouldn't have to spend time translating the words or lingo you use.

Remember, we also live in a multicultural society where English may not be everyone's primary language. When preparing your presentations, keep this in mind.

13) If your content is good, your visual impact won't matter.

FALSE. The visual component can be so distracting, that it is hard for the audience to focus on the content.

A few points to keep in mind: Some presentations are so critical to the life and well-being of the audience members, that the visual impact won't matter. That, however, is rare. For the most part, we get distracted easily, and if we see a poorly groomed speaker, or someone who has no eye contact or a grimace, it is hard to focus on the actual message.

The adage that, "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression is true" – especially when it comes to effective speaking.



The first thing your audience members see is your appearance. Before you get a chance to say a word, some of them will already have judged you based solely on how you look.

If you are presenting at a business meeting, proper business dress is called for. If you have been invited to speak at an “off-campus” event, check with the event organizer. You can never be faulted for looking “too professional,” even if the audience is dressed down. Be certain that your outfit and accessories don’t detract from your presentation. Avoid anything that makes noise or looks flashy, like jangling bracelets or earrings. Both men and women should check that their clothing fits well, and that they can move comfortably in it.

Your body language will also send the audience a message. Don’t cross your arms or fidget. Use gestures to emphasize points, but be careful not to flail your arms around. The most effective stance is a forward lean, not swaying back and forth or bouncing on your feet.

Effective speakers make regular eye contact with audience members, holding the connection to complete an idea. This helps draw listeners into your speech. Nodding to emphasize a point also helps make a connection with the audience. If you nod occasionally, audience members will, too – creating a bond.

Don’t forget that your slides also can be distracting. A misspelled word and difficult-to-see information, make it very hard to focus on the message.

14) Complimenting an audience member’s question is a good move.

FALSE – Avoid praising one questioner, as you set yourself up for audience member resentment if you don’t keep complimenting others. If you compliment all questioners, it sounds perfunctory. Be gracious to all questions (even if it is hard).

The end of your presentation does not necessarily come when you finish speaking. After your summation, you still have another opportunity to face your audience, during the question-and-answer period.

The question-and-answer session will also have an impact on your audience, so do not try to escape this crucial time by sitting down or leaving the podium. This is an opportunity for you to further clarify your ideas. You don’t want to give the audience the impression that you are relieved that your presentation is over and all you want to do is leave.

As a presenter, you may find yourself facing a hostile questioner. Your skill at disarming verbal attacks will reflect on your credibility with audience members, and the impression they have of both you and your presentation. The following approach works well to diffuse the hostile questioner:

- Let the person say whatever he or she wants to say. You listen while the individual vents.



- Paraphrase what the person just said, and how he or she feels about it, without being condescending.
- Ask probing questions to try to find out what the real issues are.
- Say one of the following statements: “I know what your issues are, now let me respond.” “Let’s problem solve together to work this out.” “Let’s look into this after the presentation has concluded.”

By using this approach, you have indicated that you value the thoughts and feelings of the questioner. The audience will respect you, and you will diffuse the hostility at the same time.

Here are some rules to guide you through the process of a successful Q & A:

- Early in your presentation (part of the preview), tell audience members when you will take questions.
- Before answering, listen carefully and paraphrase the question before you respond. You can also include the question as part of your response.
- Look at the questioner in the beginning, and look at the entire audience when answering.
- Keep all answers as brief as possible.
- Tell those with questions that aren’t relevant to the entire group that you will respond to them either at the end of the session, later in writing, or by telephone. If it is the decision maker that asks the questions, answer!
- Don’t let a stage hog take control.
- Don’t tell a lie. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so and offer to get the information for the questioner.
- End the question-and-answer period with a strong closing remark.

15) “More people have talked their way up the ladder of success than have gotten there any other way.”

TRUE – The ability to speak – to one or many – is a critical success factor. And, it is one that can be learned.

So, how did you score on this quiz?

Don’t worry; your presentations skills *can* be improved.

Take the time to ask for feedback, be videotaped, and seek training or coaching opportunities.

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