Team Presentations: A Winning Combination

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Many sales opportunities have been lost when the team presentation was poorly orchestrated and delivered. The client reaction is, "If they can't coordinate a team presentation, how can they coordinate the work we need to have done?"

Any professional sports coach will tell you that in order to win you need an effective team. Team presentations are no different, since speaking is an audience-centered sport. Instead of a touchdown or homerun, however, the members of a speaking team strive to win over their audience.

How can this be done? Common sense dictates that all members of a team need to work together to achieve the common goal. Before you can do anything, some decisions need to be made — the most important being who will be an effective leader for the team? After all, without John Elway at the helm, the odds are his team, the Broncos, wouldn't have won the Super Bowl.

Every Team Needs a Leader

So who will the team select as its leader? The best person is someone who can be responsible for all aspects of the presentation -- an overseer of sorts. The role of this person is to develop and implement the proper strategy and preparation.

The team leader is the person who needs to know a presentation's PAL™ — Purpose, Audience and Logistics. He or she should be organized and dedicated to seeing the presentation to its successful conclusion. The team leader needs to be aware of a potential pitfall -- delegating parts too soon without clarity. The leader should be hands-on until the presentation is fully planned, then some aspects can be delegated to the SMEs – subject matter experts – the individual team members.

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Knowing the PAL™!

If the team's purpose is to inform the audience, then it needs to provide new and useful information. If, however, the group's goal is to persuade people, then it needs to make audience members believe in the message, and, possibly, call participants to action.

The team leader needs to get answers to many questions: Who is in the audience? Are audience members colleagues or prospective clients? Why will they be there? What are their titles and responsibilities within the organization? What is their attitude toward the presentation's intended objective? What knowledge do they have and do they need?

Another important piece of information is logistics. This includes the number of people in the audience, time allotted for the presentation and time of day. If it is a sales presentation, logistics also can include what position your team presents (first, second, last, etc.).

Knowing other logistics about the occasion is important, too. For example, if your team part of a panel of speakers, what will the other speakers be discussing? What visual equipment is available? Are competitive groups presenting? Do they present before or after you? The answers to these questions are crucial factors in helping you tailor your presentation.

Once you have determined your PAL, write your overall objective in one sentence or less. This helps you maintain focus during the preparation process. Answering all PAL questions is critical, and allows the team leader to better decide who are the best people to gather for the team. If, for example, the audience is technical, at least one speaker needs to have a technical background. If it's a financial audience, then it certainly couldn't hurt to have an accountant or CPA on your presentation team.

Building The Right Team

After getting the PAL information, a presentation team can be assembled. When putting an effective presentation team together, the leader needs to evaluate all aspects of the speakers -- their personality traits and overall skills. Are they known for their humorous style? Do they always use props during their presentations to convey points? Are they good at fielding and answering questions?

Remember, on an effective sports team the members complement each other. That's why there are designated hitters -- to step in when a pitcher not known for his batting skills needs an assist. Building an effective presentation team is a lot like baking -- you need the right mix of ingredients and attention to detail to create something worthwhile. And each team "ingredient" needs to remember how important his or her role is to the final product.

Resist the temptation to go overboard when composing a team. The more people there are, the longer it will take in preparing the presentation and practicing.

Prior & Proper Preparation

Once the PAL™ has been determined, each member of the team has all the facts they need to get started. Each presenter should then get his or her own marching orders in writing. They will include data collection, storyboarding, preparing transitions, creating visuals and handouts.

Once you clarify your objectives, it's time to prepare the presentation. The first step is to collect the material. Unless you plan on a "data dump," look for analogies and metaphors, stories, examples, audience involvement techniques, and case studies to support the facts and figures. After collecting the material, begin to organize it so there is a logical progression of ideas. Limit the points, keeping the message simple. Writing out transitions helps to reinforce the ideas and to repeat without being redundant. Write the introduction and conclusion after the body of the presentation is completed, being sure to start with impact -- including the benefit of the

presentation to the audience -- and ending with strength and something memorable.

The user-friendly final draft should be in outline form on note paper, minimal 18 point font size, boldface. Highlight the “must know,” “should know” and “could know” materials in different colors. Avoid using note cards; they can cause you to do too much shuffling. Only write on the top two thirds of the page, otherwise your eyes and voice will drop, and you will lose your audience’s attention.

It’s also extremely important that all presenters in the team watch each other speak, reading the audience members for any cues and their response to various aspects of the presentations. This can help determine if the audience is tired, hostile, friendly, etc. -- allowing subsequent members of the team to avoid possible sensitive topics or use various strategies

Try For A Similar Yet Different Feel

It’s OK if team members want to make their own visual aids, but the leader needs to ensure that they all have the same overall look or format. If team members don’t know how to create visually exciting and appropriate visual aids, consider using one outside source -- a design house that specializes in computer graphics. Use presentation software like PowerPoint to create slides that use the same template -- using standard headlines, fonts, colors, etc.

This attention to continuity in visual aids should carry over into the content. Each presentation segment should use similar vocabulary for common phrases. For example, if the first presenter refers to the “marketing program” and the next presenter calls the same document the “action plan,” the audience members may get confused.

Remember The Ins & Outs

Three of the most overlooked aspects of team presentations are the speaker introductions, transitions and handling questions. Properly planned, these bind the team presentation together into a smooth, cohesive effort. When not done well, the overall presentation feels fragmented.

The team leader needs to decide ahead of time, with group input, how introductions will be handled. Will each presenter do a self-introduction before he or she speaks? Will the previous presenter announce the next one? Will the team leader perform all introductions? Or, will the host or coordinator of the meeting take on the "emcee" role?

Each member of the presentation team needs to create his or her own transitions. There needs to be a common thread running through all the presentation segments, so when one ends, the next begins logically, following a similar line of thought as the previous speech.

Who will field questions? Will questions be allowed during the team presentation or after? These items need to be worked out in advance.

Practice Does Make Permanent

Use the latest technologies to keep in touch with team members prior to the presentation -- send e-mail to let people know of practice sessions or event changes that might necessitate a change in speech content.

If the meeting or event organizers want to play an active role in planning the presentation, that's OK. Just make sure they are involved from the start -- not after your team has already prepared and practiced the presentations.

Individual team members should practice their presentation segments, but the whole team needs to practice together, too. This practice needs to be coordinated so there is enough time to make necessary changes. Then have at least one more

“dress rehearsal.” When the members practice, tell them to do so at least three to six times, out loud — saying the speech differently each time to keep the spontaneity. Practicing in their heads where they are eloquent won’t work as well as actually saying it. If the team will be delivering their presentations standing up, then practice the same way using a similar room setup. If the team can’t practice in the actual room where the group will be speaking, improvise. Set up the chairs in the way they will actually be used. If the team can practice in front of people, their comments will help refine the presentation. Consider recording practice sessions, and don’t forget to include a question-and-answer session.

When the leader feels the team has practiced enough and that its prepared for the big day, he or she should consider hiring an unbiased, outside consulting firm to review the team presentation one last time.

Q & A

One of the most important parts of a team presentation usually happens after it’s over – the question-and-answer session. Team members should handle questions from the audience in a uniform way. Beforehand, the leader needs to decide if questions be answered at the end of each speaker segment? Or, will audience members be asked to hold all questions until the end of the entire presentation.

Questions should be answered as briefly and concisely as you can. It’s best to paraphrase the question before answering it. This will help to clarify it and to make sure the speaker understands the question. At some time, you may encounter someone whose only objective is to stump the speaker or put you on the defensive. If you don’t know the answer, say so. Don’t try to make one up. Tell the questioner that you will find out the answer and get back to him or her.

When a question is targeted to one member of the team, but another feels compelled to address it, the team leader should step in. The danger here if left unchecked is that a concise, 20-second answer can turn into a lengthy discussion. Decide beforehand who will answer certain subject areas, or what cues will be used to invite other speakers to address a question if they are more qualified to answer it.

Knowing how to create and deliver effective presentations will enhance your ability to project a positive image. These keys are a head start toward helping you gain the competitive edge when presenting.

Too often companies don't value the impact of a powerful team presentation until they lose business. Just like in sports -- prior and proper planning, preparation and practice prevents poor performance.