

Tips for giving better presentations

Spear Communications

Understand. Be understood.

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Have you ever seen a business presentation?

Of course you have! Like death and taxes, presentations are inescapable.

And sometimes presentations feel like they might be *even worse* than death and taxes.

That's because they often work as follows.

Everyone finds a seat in a windowless, stuffy room. The lights go out.

A presentation appears on a screen. The presenter stands next to the screen and reads bulleted points, one-by-one, slide after slide after slide after slide.

Years ago, Peter Norvig made a powerful point about Powerpoint by creating The Gettysburg Powerpoint Presentation. (See <http://norvig.com/Gettysburg/>)

It's as funny and insightful today as it was when it first appeared on the Internet.

Read it, and perhaps you'll be inspired to never give a presentation like that.

Instead, consider these tips for better presentations.

1. Keep it simple

Here's a test. Next time you read a book, go to a movie, or watch a presentation, one week later try to recall as many details as you can.

What I've found is that I take with me no more than a couple points. Often I remember only one thing.

In part that's because our brains filter and simplify information.

Also, however, I look for one important take-away, because I know I'll be more likely to use a single, important lesson than a dozen moderately important ones.

Many presenters unfortunately don't have one big idea. Instead, their approach is to make bulleted-point soup.

Just remember: your audience is only going to take away one or two points, at most. So figure out the One Big Idea. Everything in your presentation should support it.

2. Have a story

I'm not suggesting your financial presentation to the board should begin "Once upon a time."

The point here is that you should understand the difference between information and story.

Information is a bunch of facts.

Story is what you get when the meaning of those facts is communicated in a way that engages your audience –intellectually, imaginatively, and emotionally.

We like information. But we *love* stories.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address tells a deeply meaningful (and economical) story of America's struggle. The Gettysburg Powerpoint Presentation strips away all the drama and human value and produces instead a series of bulleted facts.

Even if you don't actually say "Once upon a time," you need to tell a story to make people care.

On their own, facts and information are meaningless.

3. Don't read your presentation

Whether it's a Powerpoint or index cards, a presentation read word-for word is sure to underwhelm your audience.

Here's why.

When you look at your notes, or at a screen, you disengage from the audience, and the audience disengages from you.

Have you ever tried to talk to someone who is typing away on their phone? Not very engaging, is it?

An audience watching you read from a screen is giving you at most 30% of their attention. You've lost them.

And the irony is that you are reading from that screen because you desperately don't want to miss a single one of your important bulleted points.

But what's better? Hitting all your points in a presentation no one remembers a week later, or hitting some of your points in one that they do?

By reading your notes you have also disengaged from the moment. Any opportunity to make an observation, to be spontaneous, to have a sudden quickening insight, or to read your audience, is gone.

It's as if you're not even there.

So be present and engaged by using your notes as a launching pad or, at most, a prompt. Focus all your attention on people, not on props!

4. Practice speaking

I'm a soft-spoken introvert who has been on radio and TV.

I've presented to rooms of several hundreds of people. I know how hard it is.

All that you have to determine the energy level of your presentation is your voice. And it's impossible to give a good presentation if your energy level is low.

So speak loudly and clearly, at a moderate pace, and you'll project more energy into the room.

A soft and slow voice will put people to sleep. As a general rule, most of us will have to talk a lot more loudly during a presentation than we are used to.

I used to feel like I was shouting, but to the audience it was just a normal speaking voice.



If you are nervous, you will talk too fast. If you don't know the material and you are ill-prepared, you will talk slowly as you stumble your way through.

Just be aware that this is a critical skill, and if you work at it you'll be rewarded.

Believe me, it's well worth the effort.

5. Figure out what impression you want to make before-hand

Are you trying to motivate your audience? Caution them? Inspire?

Set the tone early, and sustain it.

The emotional effect of a presentation is critical. Most presentations are low on emotional effect, so by having this worked out in advance, you'll already be well ahead of most presenters.

6. Have fun!

Sounds impossible, right?

But here's the thing. A presentation is always—*always*—also a performance. You're on a stage and in charge.

Move around the room. Take control of the environment. Let your personality come through.

Practice modulating your voice, using pitch and volume dynamics to underline points and add interest.

These are all techniques I learned on television. And that's what a presentation is—being on television.

If you don't entertain, you don't communicate. It's that simple.

And the best way to entertain, as I've shown you above, is to be a real human being with a simple message and a story, not a robot reading a series of facts from an overhead.

You can do it.



- Wayne K. Spear is the Founder and President of Spear Communications. This article is part of his ongoing series called "Thought Bombs."

