

Presentation Skills Training and Coaching Tips (Dec 08)

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Good presentation skills are within everyone's reach. For many people, if not most, presenting can be a daunting and unpleasant experience. It needn't be so, and here we'll give you some simple tips to help you hone more effective presentation skills development.

Presentations are an effective way to communicate to large numbers of people at the same time. However, it is not just about communicating information, but more importantly, to have advanced presentation skills you should be able to create interest and excitement in your subject and trust and enthusiasm in you.

Let's have a look at some of the essentials

Preparation

Practice

Practice on a colleague or friend. Think about who your audience is and what you want them to get out of an effective presentation. Think about content and style. If you video yourself get someone else to evaluate your performance; you will find it very difficult to be objective about yourself. Prepare, prepare, prepare.

Reconnoiter

Go into the presentation room before the event; practice any moves you may have to make, e.g. getting up from your chair to the podium. Errors in the first 20 seconds can be very disorientating.

Avoid 'Blue peter syndrome'

Try not to over prepare. Don't rehearse the whole thing right through too often. Your time is better spent going over your opening beginning and your finish. Pick a few choice bits to learn by heart.

Technical support

Test the equipment before the presentation; get familiar with it before you start. PowerPoint and OHPs often seem as though they're out to get you, so make sure you're in charge not them.

Visual aids

Use visuals to give a big picture quickly, graphics, pictures, cartoons bar charts etc; you can then use words to elaborate. Slides with words on are of limited value. If you seem to have a lot you may find you are showing your audience your speaker notes!

Presentation style

Be yourself

Use any personal gestures or vocal inflections to your advantage. It's very hard to change the way you express yourself. More effective presentations are ones where you actual put the energy into the presentation (this is a message you will hear again). Similarly, do not try to be anyone else or copy another presenter's style.

Wave

Be more expressive rather than less. These days 'good communicators' are more and more frequently seen on TV and held up as models. You giving a presentation is not TV. This is you communicating live. Gestures help understanding and convey your enthusiasm for the topic.

Dealing with presentation nervousness

Be nervous

A certain amount of nervousness is vital for a good presentation. You need the extra energy to communicate: What you feel when you stand up in front of people is the urge to either run away or fight. If you endeavor to stifle those feelings you will be inhibited, restricted, artificial and wooden. The added adrenaline will keep your faculties sharp and ready to engage with your audience.

Breathe

Extra adrenaline, however, can result in shallow upper chest breathing and tension. Taking a slow, deep breath, breathing fully out and then in again, will relax you. Strangely having something to pick up and put down tends to release your breathing.

Get something else to do

It may seem an odd idea, but our bodies seem to feel better when they have some sort of displacement activity to occupy them. It's the reason people hold pens and fiddle with things. A limited amount of this sort of activity will not be too obtrusive and can make you feel a lot more secure.

Hold on to something

When you start, you are at your most insecure. Avoid all the well-meant advice about what you are and are not allowed to do. Until you feel settled do anything you can find to make yourself feel secure. This includes holding on to a lectern. Even just standing next to something solid will make you feel less wobbly.

Go slow

The breathing tip above will help you to slow down your presentation. Go more slowly than you think necessary to avoid gabbling. Your audience needs the time to assimilate and interpret what you are saying. It's a fact that when adrenaline is flowing, your sense of time is distorted, and what seems OK to you may look like fast forward to your audience.

Working your audience

Converse

Have a conversation with your audience. They may not actually say anything, but make them feel consulted, questioned, challenged, argued with; then they will stay awake and attentive. Your job as a presenter is to stimulate and communicate with your audience into wanting to get the information you have, not just to present that information at them.

Interact

Engage with your present audience, not the one you have prepared for. Look for reactions to your ideas and respond to their signals. If the light bulbs are not going on find another way to say it. Monitor their reactions; it's the only way you'll know how you're doing and what you should do next. If you don't interact you might as well send a video recording of your presentation. It's why you came.

Show conviction

Give an expressive presentation and an enthusiastic presentation and your audience will respond, which is what you want. At the very bottom line disagreement is preferable to being ignored. Use your excitement, pace yourself to give an exciting presentation, use something you know you feel strongly about to build up to an important point or as a springboard to another idea.

Get some perspective

The odds are that someone in the audience will not like you or may disagree with you. There will probably be someone else out there for whom you can do no wrong. As a rule of thumb, the majority of most

audiences want to like you and what you have to say - they want you to be good. They didn't come hoping to be bored or irritated by your presentation.

Structuring effective presentations

Use metaphors

Metaphors and analogies are vital to communication. 'It's like climbing a greasy pole', for example, conveys far more than just literal meaning. It conveys image and feeling and enables others to empathize through similar experiences of their own. And remember the light bulbs - if they're not lighting up try a different metaphor.

Examples

Giving an example always helps your listeners to see more clearly what you mean. It's quicker and more colorful.

The point

Stick to the point using three or four basic ideas. For any detail that you cannot communicate in 20 minutes, try another medium such as handouts or brochures.

Finale

End as if you have done well. Do this even if you feel like you've done badly. First, you're probably the worst judge of how you've done, and second, if you finish well you'll certainly fool some of the people into thinking it was all pretty good. And anyway a good finish will get you some applause - and you deserve it!

Developing as a presenter

Trust yourself

If you do not think you are up to a particular presentation either get help (do training courses and rehearsals), or get someone else to do it (there's no shame in recognizing your limits). However, most people have better presentation skills than they think they do. Recognize what you have. If you doubt your ability to think on your feet, for example, then defer questions till after the presentation. Similarly, do not use a joke as an ice breaker if you are not good at telling them.

Success is the best presentation training

Don't over reach yourself. Several short presentations that you feel went well will do you far more good than one big one that makes you sick with nerves and leaves you feeling inadequate.

Feedback

Encourage those around you to tell you the things you did well. Very few of us make progress by being told what was wrong with our presentation. When we're up in front of an audience we all have very fragile egos.

Follow these essential tips and your presentation skills development will blossom.

About the authors:

Jo Ellen and Robin run Impact Factory a training company who provide Presentation Skills, Public Speaking, Communications Training, Leadership Development and Executive Coaching for Individuals.

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