

# Honing your presentation skills

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When starting your own business, often times there are instances when you need to deliver presentations that help sell an idea or product to customers and partners. Startups in particular need to have the best and sharpest presentations skills to sell their business ideas.

In 20 years of public speaking, we've learned to deliver the best presentations we can to our customers and we are going to share some of our "tips and tricks" for delivering solid presentations.

Here are some things you can do that will improve any presentation.

## Planning and preparing

Planning, preparation, and practice are all important to a well-received presentation, which is your goal. If you spend enough time in each of these areas, you'll be confident when you start your presentation. Your audience will recognize that and it will help them have confidence in you. Here are some tips to get you started:

- **Plan** It isn't that people plan to fail, it's that they fail to plan. Have a crisp plan for what you are going to deliver from your opening statement to the time you close your presentation and take questions.
- **Double-check everything** A checklist can help you at each phase. Include everything you might need such as business cards, the names and locations of your presentation files and backup presentation files, and any hardware you might need including power cords, batteries, and a clicker for your PowerPoint presentation.
- **Have multiple copies of your presentation** Have local copies (on your laptop or tablet) as well as network copies, but try to avoid using networks because of latency and potential failure issues. If you have practiced enough, you might not even need the slides.
- **Clicker** Make sure you have a clicker and know how to use it. Consider using the same one all the time, taking it on the road with you so you don't have to use a borrowed clicker you aren't familiar with and don't know how to operate. Also remember to have a set of backup batteries.
- **Visualize** Sit down in front of a mirror and visualize how your presentation might go. You'll feel uncomfortable at first but this can really be helpful. Think of questions you might get from your group and think through the possible answers.
- **Be prepared and on time** Make sure you have plenty of time to get your

computer set up, video and audio working, wireless connectivity set up, your clicker out and ready, and have a bottle of water nearby. Bring plenty of business cards and any other material you might need to share. You do not want to be setting up your session in front of waiting customers. You want everything in place so you can start on time.

## Practicing makes a difference

You've heard it before: Practice makes perfect. Make sure you know exactly what you are going to say and how your presentation will flow. Test your PowerPoint slides for flow and consider adding animations and transitions into your slides. They can make your presentation more dynamic and add creativity into your delivery. When you're done practicing, practice some more. Professional presenters have practice runs of their presentations. A practice run gives you the opportunity to work out any stumbling points or glitches that might not be apparent until you actually start talking. And a listener might have another perspective on what can be added or cut from your presentation to make it more meaningful and engaging for your audience.

Practicing out loud with a colleague who understands your goals is always good if you can do it. Other "sample audiences" include:

- Yourself in a mirror or use a video camera
- Your pet (pets don't seem to mind repetition and restarts)
- Your significant other
- Your parents (always good for an ego boost)
- Your boss

Practicing out loud also helps you ensure that you will keep within the planned time frame. Your audience will appreciate it if you start on time and end on time.

## Stating your presentation

You will want to acknowledge and engage your audience from the start and gain their confidence. The following tips will help you do just that:

- **Location, location, location** It is important to know where you are in the room at all times; you don't want to find yourself in front of the projector. If you can, make a day-before reconnaissance mission to the room you will be presenting in; it will ease a lot of your nerves. You want to "work the room" and move and get away from the podium. Move into the crowd and from side to side. Getting close to your audience will have them more engaged.
- **Music** You might enjoy playing music from your computer as people enter the room. Music can give a room a welcoming feeling. It also sends the message that you are set up and ready to go—that is, it says that you are well prepared.
- **Meet and greet** Start on time. Make sure you smile and say hello to people as they

arrive. This is a good time to hand out business cards. This activity makes you feel confident and ready to deliver the best presentation you can. It also makes the audience feel personally engaged with you and your presentation.

- **Smile** You have only one chance to make a first impression, so be sure to smile. When you smile, you show your audience that you want to be there. More importantly, you let them know that you want them to be there too. This sets the tone for the rest of the presentation. If you are in a good mood, it will resonate with others in the room.
- **Remain calm** Nervous? Remember that all attendees are people very much like you; they all get up in the morning and get dressed for their day just like you do. Also, there are things you can do to help reduce your nervousness such as lowering the brightness of lights so you see less of the audience. Try focusing your eyes at the very back of the room; this can be helpful too. Most importantly, don't forget to practice ahead of time. Knowing you are well prepared should go a long way toward keeping you calm and feeling positive.
- **Open with an ice breaker** Open with a statement or message that is tailored for this day and this audience. It might be a reference to a current event or a positive comment about the city or town you are in. It can be a statement or a question. Whatever it is, it should be clear that it isn't a standard presentation line that everyone hears—it is specifically for the people you are talking to today. This helps engage your listeners and starts your relationship with them on a somewhat personal and positive note.
- **Use the power of your voice** Avoid presenting in a monotone voice, use voice inflexions to help make important points. You can even whisper to drive home a major point. Learn to vary your speed and tempo as well.

## The presentation itself

- **Limit the number of bullet points** Bullet points are a great way to convey important information. However, when presenting to a group of people, too many of them can put people to sleep.
- **Do not make the audience read** When using presentation tools such as slide decks, you might be tempted to use a lot of words to describe the ideas you want to convey. Do not. Use short phrases that *reinforce* what you are saying. The audience should be focused primarily on you.
- **Help your audience retain information** They won't miss anything if you:
  - Tell them what you are going to tell them
  - Tell them
  - Tell them what you told them
- **Repeat all questions** Repeating a question ensures that you understand the

question and helps others who might not have heard the question. This is especially true if you are using a microphone and the audience doesn't have a microphone for asking questions. When finished, thank the person for the question.

- **End on time** Everyone's time is valuable. You want your audience to know you appreciate the time they've given you. Finishing on time also tells them that you recognize the value of their time.
- **Thank your attendees and give them contact info** It is always good to thank everyone who attended and to give them your business card and any collateral.

**A GOOD REFERENCE** We have found Jerry Weissman's book, *Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story* (FT Press, 2008), full of great ideas and advice for anyone who needs to make presentations. One highlight from the book is his view on what you do *not* want to do; he calls these the Five Cardinal Sins of Presentations:

- No clear point
- No audience benefit
- No clear flow
- Too detailed
- Too long

We hope these tips and tricks help you deliver your best presentations, which will in turn help you land the best deals for your growing business.