

## STRATEGY

### Maximize Your Next Business Presentation



Carolyn Shartenberg Lavin

In today's competitive business environment, being a dynamic presenter has a direct impact on your chance for success and recognition.

You may be afforded the opportunity to give an informal business pitch to a small group of current or potential clients or a more formal presentation to a local, civic or charitable gathering.

Or you may be asked to assess your own strengths at your salary and performance review.

Whatever the situation may be, expertise alone is not enough to deliver a winning presentation. You need to recognize and implement skills that will convey the substance of your message in a way that your audience can understand.

The success and quality of a presentation depend not only on what you say but how you say it. While no great presentation is ever made on technique alone, communication analysts agree that 80 to 90 percent of the success of your presentation depends up on your delivery style. With those daunting figures in mind, it is easy to conclude that you just don't have the time to prepare and practice. But consider this: Winging it just won't work. Even a little bit of time spent preparing will go a long way.

#### Do Your Homework

Doing your homework is key to understanding the audience and conveying your message. A good presenter will investigate the size, age, position and potential biases of the expected audience well in advance of the actual engagement. Ask about any hidden agendas. Determine how long you are expected to speak. Know exactly where you are going, the room layout, parking availability and accommodations for your visuals.

Once you have compiled the relevant background information, organize your ideas so you will be sure to hit your key points. Create an outline, identifying the burning issues or issues of top concern to your audience, not just to you. Instead of shuffling a scripted talk, use cue cards or mind maps. For added impact, remember that utilizing a visual more than doubles your audience's chances of remembering your message.

The best bet for combining your outline or key points with compelling visuals is often utilizing a PowerPoint presentation. By creating slides that list your key points—in a manner that is of interest to your audience and also cues you to hit your main messages—you are free from notes and scripts.

Once you have decided on how best to present your information, the final step is to practice. There's no substitute for actually delivering your presentation a few times to business colleagues, family and friends and even, if necessary, your household pets. Practicing in front of a mirror or videotaping yourself will allow you to capture your non-verbal style as well.

Unfortunately, the practice step is the one usually overlooked in the last-minute crunch to prepare. A few practice sessions greatly alleviate that presentation anxiety and a few sleepless nights. Seasoned presenters, moreover, know that actually doing a dry run instills familiarity with the concepts and offers a healthy dose of self-confidence.

#### Maximize Your Personal Style

Because clothes are a big part of your non-verbal communication—a self-portrait—pay close attention to what you wear. For first-time meetings, clothes are pivotal to that all-important first impression. Remember, unless you are speaking to

an audience of nudists, the group will make some judgment about you based on your attire. Almost everyone has something to say—or think—about clothes. Consider what's appropriate for the occa-

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sion and dress it up a notch. Show the members of your audience you think they are important, so you have dressed up a little just for them.

Next, think about how your voice and your words sound. Eliminate the fillers: the “uhms” and “you knows.” Become comfortable with a few poignant pauses and incorporate action verbs into your presentation. If you are addressing a large group, enlist a supporter in the back of the room to give you a sign if you need to speak louder. Your goal is to be friendly and conversational while enjoying a commanding presence. After all, this is your opportunity to shine.

Work on maintaining eye contact to engage your audience. Effective eye contact will probably do more to enhance your presentation than any other technique. The ears may hear but the eyes communicate. If you want to know if people are truly listening to you, look into their eyes.

Proper eye contact, moreover, does not mean that you move your head in a rotating motion like an oscillating summer fan or radar sweep. While some presenters believe in this method of giving equal time to each person in the audience, it often results in the presenter looking above the heads of the audience members and connecting with no one.

#### Take a Realistic Approach

Other elements to address when working on both the substantive and stylistic aspects of a presentation include: using body language effectively, dealing with anxiety, getting—and keeping—your audience's attention, and fielding the tough questions. But realistically, a busy professional is not able to spend hours preparing and fine-tuning a presentation. A practical approach for the busy professional is to identify one or two behaviors that you can change and to adopt a few new techniques.

Next time you are called upon to address a group, strive to combine your knowledge and expertise about the substantive subject matter with the most dynamic aspects of your personal style in order to deliver that winning presentation.

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