

# progress report



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## Substance and Style: The Makings of a Great Presenter

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**I**n today's competitive business environment, being a good presenter has a direct impact on your chance for success and recognition. You may be faced with giving an informal business pitch to a small group of potential clients, or a more formal presentation to a local, civic or charitable gathering. Your opportunity to shine may take place at your own salary or performance review, or at a staff meeting where you must present an issue. 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 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 where you are going, the room layout, parking availability, and accommodations for your visuals. Once you have the relevant background information, organize your ideas so you will be sure to hit your key points. Create an outline. Identify the burning issues or issues of top concern to your audience, not just to you. Use cue cards or mind maps; Don't shuffle a script. Use visuals. Adding a visual more than doubles your audience's chances of remembering your message.

Practicing is also an important part of doing your homework. There's no substitute for actually delivering your presentation a few times to family, friends, even your dog. Practice in front of a mirror. Consider using an audiotape or videotape to capture your practice session. Watch, listen to and critique your delivery. Unfortunately, the practice step is the one usually overlooked in the last-minute crunch to prepare. Seasoned presenters, however, 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 attention to what you wear. 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 occasion 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, get in touch with your voice. Eliminate the fillers: the "uhms" and "you knows." Become comfortable with a few poignant pauses and incorporate action verbs into your presentation. Your goal is to be friendly and conversational while enjoying a commanding presence. After all, you are the one invited to speak.

Work on maintaining eye contact. 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 someone is truly listening to you, look into their eyes.

### 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 which 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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