

The Art of Making Persuasive Presentations

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In today's world of video conferencing, PowerPoint templates, voice-mail messages, and faxed memos, it is the spoken word that is the heart of any presentation. CEOs, politicians, department directors, instructors, committee chairs, and others will stumble or rise based on what they say and how they say it. We can recall our own reactions to Senator Howard Dean repeatedly screaming after his Iowa caucus loss; when President Bush squinted and scowled with what seemed to be annoyed impatience; and at Senator John Kerry's woodenness when interacting in public. The words they chose were important, and the manner in which they were expressed became quite critical.

Most people don't like making presentations. Whether the audience consists of 6 or 6,000, making a speech strikes fear into the hearts of most of us. We sweat, mumble, and race through our words, eyeing the door, eager to escape. However, making a persuasive presentation is personally and professionally satisfying, and almost anyone is capable of making a good speech.

My goal when working with presenters who want to make polished, persuasive presentations is not to create a new persona or a miniversion of a popular television personality. It is to help the speaker become the best that he or she can be. For example, I was asked to coach a chief executive officer in charge of a very successful, fast-growing,

high-tech, entrepreneurial company. He was well known for his amazing success and was almost as well known for his unfocused and rambling style of speaking. The CEO, Louie, was asked to make a presentation describing his success. His primary goal was to tell the story of how he created his company. I suggested to him that many of the people in the audience were hoping to be in his shoes at this time next year—that is, being CEO of a number-one company. Those people would be interested not only in learning what to do, but also in learning what *not* to do. Because his climb to the top had not been an easy one, it would be both illuminating for the audience and humanizing for Louie to talk about some of the mistakes he made along the way and the obstacles that he had to overcome. Louie had lots of stories and warmed to the task. Now Louie had overcome one of the first obstacles in making an effective presentation—he had a clear idea of what he wanted to say.

When you are asked to speak, it is because people want to hear what you have to say. They want your knowledge, perspective, and personality, with just a bit more than the usual polish and organization. But whether you are a novice or veteran presenter, the notion of speaking can create anxiety, knowing that in a few days, weeks, or months your audience will be waiting for you, hoping that you will be informative,

insightful, entertaining, and interesting. The good news is that the audience wants you to do well. The audience starts out giving you the benefit of the doubt and may forgive small mistakes.

Successful speakers know that they have to structure their presentations in a way that combines two important components: (1) a clear understanding of what they want to say and (2) some consideration about what their audiences want to hear. Additionally, speakers who make effective presentations take the time to determine the goals they want to achieve, prepare the materials and aids that will enhance what they have to say, and practice delivery of their speeches and use of supporting materials and aids. These are the critical elements of making persuasive presentations.

PREPARATION

Critical to any presentation is the preparation. Even if you have only a few minutes before an impromptu opportunity, the following key elements will help you focus on your message and the needs of the audience you will be addressing.

Define Audience Response

What actions or behaviors do you desire from the attendees after the presentation? These

constitute your “end items” or the desired ROI (return on investment). Be able to clearly articulate your reasons for giving the presentation. You don’t just want to talk at people; you want them to *do* something as a result of your talking. **Exhibit 1** shows a matrix covering where in the learning process they must arrive to achieve your presentation goals:

The goal you seek will influence your choice of presentation technique (see **Exhibit 2**). For example, if you want your audience to learn something (such as the importance of neutering cats and dogs), you will need to provide information that helps the audience gain conceptual awareness or knowledge about an idea or process (such as the neutering process statistics about pet populations, and the pros and cons of having an animal neutered).

If you want the members of the audience to not only understand the idea, but also to make a decision about it or change their attitudes about your topic, then your presentation will have to not only provide a new understanding of the topic, but also motivate your audience to take some action (e.g., decide to take a pet to be neutered or choose to donate money to the SPCA to support the local chapter’s pet-neutering program).

If you are seeking to get your audience members to take action or alter their usual behavior, then it will require that they take their pet to be neutered. If you are hoping to

<i>Learning Steps</i>		<i>Outcomes</i>	
<i>Behavior Presentation Goal</i>	<i>Conceptual Awareness</i>	<i>Emotional Choice</i>	<i>Behavioral Change</i>
Knowledge	X		
Decision	X	X	
Attitude	X	X	
Action	X	X	X
Skill	X	X	X

Exhibit 1. Learning Process

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Distinguishing Characteristics</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Inform or Teach	Attempt to secure listeners' understanding of subject	* Reports: Technical Operating Research
Stimulate	Attempt to intensify old beliefs, awaken interest of listeners	* Community chair's appeal * "Kick-off" speech * Tribute speech
Persuade or Convince	Direct audience toward a mental commitment	* Problem-solution analysis * Budget presentation
Actuate or Sell	Direct audience toward specific behavior	* Buy this product or service * Support the project * Change the procedure
Specific Examples:		
To Inform	I want the audience to <i>understand</i> the major features of the employee benefits program.	
To Stimulate	I want the audience to become vividly <i>aware</i> of the importance of affirmative action.	
To Persuade	I want my audience to <i>believe</i> that the new insurance product will best meet retirement needs.	
To Actuate	I want my audience to sign up for the program. I want them to <i>participate</i> in the plan.	

Exhibit 2. Speech Purposes

have your audience develop a skill relating to your topic, they might practice communicating the information obtained from your presentation about neutering pets so that they can readily share it with others, become an advocate for the pet-neutering program, or solicit their neighbors for donations.

Generate Your Materials

In this phase, be creative. Generate more materials than you need to help illuminate your presentation. Don't evaluate at this point. Instead, brainstorm to come up with different concepts that will illustrate your points.

At our second meeting, Louie had photos, graphs, charts, and artwork. He was knowledgeable and enthusiastic, which are both important elements.

Demonstrate Knowledge

Know what you are talking about. Have you ever listened to someone try to explain quantum physics when he or she didn't really understand it? It's not only confusing, but also unconvincing. If you are not the expert on your topic, take the time to learn as much as you can. There is a reason that you are up there talking and not someone

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else. Louie had firsthand knowledge as the CEO from the company's inception to the day of the conference. This is invaluable knowledge that an audience would be eager to hear.

Be Enthusiastic

The energy and passion used to convey your message is exciting for your audience. If you don't care about your topic, why would your audience? Louie was clearly enthusiastic about his firm's technology and customers' growing needs and was delighted to talk to people about being an entrepreneur.

Organize Your Materials

Organize your thoughts and evaluate your supporting materials. This is the point at which you should elect only the materials that best

add to what you want to say and discard those that add little.

It's easy to fall in love with every visual aid you have, but too many can be overwhelming for your audience and some can just end up working against you. Remember that:

- ❑ Too many graphs, charts, and tables can confuse the message.
- ❑ A small type, font, or graphic is hard to read by people in the back of the room (or older people in the middle or front).
- ❑ Some colors are challenging to look at (for example, yellow).

A good visual aid *adds information dynamically*. It should:

- Help, not hinder;
- Clarify, not confuse;
- Be attractive, not distracting;
- Work for you, not against you;
- Add to your effectiveness, not subtract from your credibility;
- Inform, not irritate; and
- Assist you, not replace you.

Below are some guidelines on how to select and use visual aids:

1. Determine, in advance, how your subject will be *enhanced* by the use of a visual aid.
2. Review subject matter to determine the *time* at which the aid will be most meaningful and beneficial.
3. Ascertain which *type* of aid will be most helpful in *reinforcing* the information presented.
4. Prepare or order aids, allowing ample time to *review* use of aids or to make adjustments, corrections, or changes.

5. *Practice* the presentation using the aids as they will be employed.
6. *Arrange* for placement of aids, backup equipment, and technical assistance as dictated by group requirements.
7. Also consider the following in selecting or creating aids:
 - Clarity
 - Legibility
 - Brevity
 - Color
 - Appeal
 - Relevancy
 - Timeliness
 - Technical accuracy
 - Practicality

Louie and I, along with his assistant and some talented folks in the graphic arts department, spent a great deal of time making visual aids that emphasized key points of his presentation. Even though some of the materials used in previous presentations could work, we were not doing a “cut and paste” job or duplicating something that had been done elsewhere for another audience.

We thought about the goals for the specific audience. Large type that could be seen from the back of the room by people over the age of 40 meant that there would be less data on the slides. Major points of the program would be considered for visual aids—not minor points. Although it was painful for Louie to toss some of the clever and inventive material he wanted to include, I assured him that people would be more interested in him and what he was saying.

Prepare Your Notes

Put time guidelines down the edge of your paper or cards (marking every 15 minutes is a

good idea). Use bold letters so you can read the cards without bending over. Write out cues for special actions, such as:

- Place such-and-such on easel.
- Hang easel chart on wall.
- Play tape recording.
- Hold up prop (45 record).

Use an outline format of key phrases, ideas, or critical pieces of data only. Make the print large enough so that you can simply glance down to remind yourself what is coming next. Do not write out anything word for word. You should know your presentation well enough to use points of reference to keep you on track.

Nothing can substitute for preparation. Most people can tell immediately between the person who is shooting from the hip and the

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one who has given his or her presentation some thought. The more prepared you are, the more polished you will appear.

Prepare the Audiovisuals

You do not have to purchase the latest state-of-the-art graphics and computers to grab and keep the attention of your audience. You can prepare low-cost, effective audiovisuals that capture the interest of your listeners. A small prop can make your point powerfully. Before the days of laptop computers and projectors, people used flip charts and magic markers, and many still do.

Louie decided to hold up his product. There was nothing state-of-the-art about this, but it

would get the audience's interest. He decided to have a visual of the company's Web site. It was the main point of customer contact, and displaying it made sense because the audience included not only his peers and possible competitors, but also existing and potential customers.

PRACTICE

Once you have put the time into preparation, the rest is practice. This is where the fine-tuning comes in.

Louie and I talked about what he would wear. Attire should be neat, appropriate, and tailored to your audience. Rarely do presenters get punished for dressing well, but they can easily be punished for not dressing well enough. Keep in mind that you want your audience to look at you and not focus on your clothing, hairstyle, or accessories. Avoid distracting cartoon ties, political mes-

Take a deep breath, collect yourself, look out into—or over—your audience, and begin with a strong opening.

sage pins and shirts, jangling jewelry, and clothing that is "too" anything: too big, too tight, too short, too old, too revealing, or too distracting. Hair that stays in place won't require you to touch it constantly. Don't play with coins in your pocket, and don't wear high heels that cause you to teeter off balance.

If you are introduced, thank the person who introduced you. Take a deep breath, collect yourself, look out into—or over—your audience, and begin with a strong opening.

Openings set the tone for you and your audience. What grabs their attention?

- ❑ A question: "When was the last time you got what you really wanted?"
- ❑ A statistic: "More than 65 percent of teenage drug use takes place in rural and suburban areas."
- ❑ A story: "I was in a hotel room, waiting to make a major presentation that would lift my career to new heights, when I got the call that would change my life forever."

Louie decided to open with the story of how the company he ran began. He set the stage with a vivid description of two college-age brothers in the basement of their parents' home. We both knew that the story would grab the audience's attention. Some good detail and amusing examples of both successes and failures kept their interest.

Do a Dry Run

Choose a friendly compatriot who is able and willing to rip you to shreds—better he or she does it than the final audience.

Practice may not make perfect, but it dramatically improves anyone's presentation. If you speed up and rush through your words, practice will allow you to be able to insert some reminders to breathe. If you tend to slow down your speech, your written time guidelines will remind you of when you want to say certain phrases.

What about nervousness? We all suffer from it to one degree or another. Here are a few things you can do to tackle the issue of anxiety:

- ❑ Get regular experience (join Toastmasters, give talks for Rotary Clubs).
- ❑ Augment with synthetic experience. Mentally give talks and hear the clapping afterward (productive programming).

- ❑ Undergo a relaxation exercise just prior to "going on," such as deep breathing to the count of four.

Do you have distracting mannerisms? We all have them: the "you knows" and "uhhs" and scratching and rocking. If you can, get yourself videotaped and view it. When you decide you want to eliminate a distraction from your behavior, you can productively program it out. Have your friendly compatriot throw a paper clip at you every time you do it to increase your awareness. Once you are more aware of doing things that are distracting for your listeners, you can reduce them.

Eye contact is very important. Look around the room as you talk and make eye

Ask for constructive criticism so that you can learn what to eliminate, improve, or retain.

contact. Notice cues from your audience by observing body language. If you are right-handed, force yourself to regularly make eye contact with the right-hand side of the room (left-handers, vice versa). Are you unable to look someone in the eye? That's not a big problem. Look at the space between a person's eyebrows. It will appear to him or her that you are making eye contact and will get you closer than making none at all.

Louie's dress rehearsal was our last session together. He tended to embellish his stories, so we worked on keeping them amusing but concise. His hair tended to fall over his eyes so I suggested that he either cut it shorter or use hair products to hold it in place. He had worked hard on resisting the urge to turn around and read his slides and had finally learned to trust that the slides still said what they did when they were designed.

Deliver and Debrief

It's showtime! Make your presentation with confidence and enthusiasm. But when it is over, be sure to get together with someone who attended the presentation and whose opinion you respect. Ask for constructive criticism so that you can learn what to eliminate, improve, or retain. Regularly debriefing the many presentations you make in your career will increase your comfort and your standards.

TIPS FOR POLISHED PROS

I've been in the audience and watched, stunned, as speakers made errors so glaring that the goals of their speeches were lost on their audiences. For example:

- A panel member who was given 10 minutes to speak took 25 minutes.
- A salesperson read from a sheet of paper, word for word, in a monotone.
- A keynote speaker used a detailed football metaphor for a presentation to an audience that was 80 percent female.

Everyone has seen people make missteps when giving presentations. Insight alone, however, will not improve your performance when it's your turn. So, here are some tips concerning several aspects of presentations that will add polish to your presentation.

When using projectors:

- ❑ Set them up ahead of time for focal length and focus. Find out where the room light switch is for dimming. Make sure the lighting of the room complements the visibility and colors of the slides.
- ❑ Always, always make sure there is an extra bulb. Bring your own, if unsure.

- ❑ Make sure your letters are large enough to be seen in the back of the room. Don't try to squeeze too much information onto a slide.
- ❑ Make sure the colors are easy on the eye.
- ❑ Don't let the presentation upstage you.
- ❑ Remember that your audience is potentially made up of older individuals who may be wearing bifocals! Don't make your slides too challenging to read.
- ❑ Don't overwhelm the slide with animation, sound, or graphics. Strive for clarity and simplicity.
- ❑ Have a backup plan! Computerized equipment can crash for a number of reasons. A printout of your slides or black-and-white overheads will allow you to continue your presentation.

Have a few keywords written in front of you and amplify them in your talk.

- ❑ Don't just read what is on the screen. Have a few keywords written in front of you and amplify them in your talk.
- ❑ Don't use complete sentences on your slides—just use key phrases in bold letters.
- ❑ If you use slides as a prompt for your presentation, glance at the computer or projector when looking at the audience. If you can read it like that, the audience can read it.
- ❑ If you are using PowerPoint, take advantage of the ability to "build" your slide, adding information as you go.
- ❑ Get used to the versatility of permanent and washable markers if you are using overhead transparencies.

When using chart paper on an easel:

- ❑ Use a broad-tipped felt pen (at least 1/8") so people in the back can see.

- ❑ Do as many of the entries as you can before the presentation so that your live add-ons will complete the picture, and the audience will have less silent time waiting for you.
- ❑ Use "reveals" by adding one more item per page and reducing the previous items to lighter shadow colors.
- ❑ If "bleed-through" is a problem (where they can faintly see the next chart through the current chart) staple two or more chart sheets together to provide visual insulation.

Try using different methods of presentation, such as:

- ❑ *Chronological*, describing the past, present, and future;
- ❑ *Historical*, relating the story of the past;
- ❑ *Problem/solution*, identifying the problem and then presenting the solution to it;
- ❑ *Overview*, reviewing key points using a "broad-brush" approach;
- ❑ *Spatial*, tying together a variety of points under one issue or topic; and
- ❑ *Comparison/analogy*, comparing or contrasting one thing with another.

The above methods are not mutually exclusive; several methods may be used during one presentation.

Use humor in your delivery, but use it with discretion. If you are known to be a non-humorous person, don't use it. If you use it, make it fit the situation. Avoid humor that may be misconstrued as inappropriate. If in doubt, skip it.

Making a presentation with a copresenter can often be better than going it alone for a few reasons:

- ❑ It gives the listener a regular change of voice and pace.

- ❑ It gives each speaker rest time.
- ❑ The speaker who is "off" is free to observe the audience and (later) critique the other speaker.

If you do copresent, work out signals that are natural. Don't make your signals so obvious that the audience can pick them up.

When providing handouts or notes for the audience, **plan to give handouts at the appropriate time**—that is, *beforehand*, if attendees need to have a common level of knowledge; *at the beginning*, if attendees will need to write on the handouts; or *afterward*, if the notes are needed merely for documentation. If you are going to hand notes out after the presentation, announce that fact ahead of time so the members of the audience know they do not need to take extensive notes.

When dealing with hecklers/disturbers:

- ❑ Handle them calmly and with confidence.
- ❑ Do not let them hook you into their game.
- ❑ Do not become defensive.
- ❑ When the disagreement they pose looks insoluble, opt out with something like, "OK, I think I understand your opinion. Mine disagrees with it, but one of the ground rules we have here today is it is OK to disagree."

When conducting a question-and-answer session:

- ❑ Repeat the question if other people in the audience have difficulty hearing the questioner.
- ❑ Answer the question as succinctly as possible. Do not succumb to the temptation

to dump all your knowledge about the area questioned.

- ❑ Seek release from the questioner before going on (e.g., "Did I answer your question?").
- ❑ If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it, and ask if anyone in the audience knows the answer. Don't bluff. If no one knows the answer, tell the questioner you will find it out and get back to him or her. Then do it!

Engage your audience by:

- ❑ Reading the body language of members of your audience. If the count of crossed

If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it, and ask if anyone in the audience knows the answer.

arms goes from 2 to 15, you have a problem that you shouldn't ignore. During your preparation, think about what you will do if this happens and be sure to have a backup plan (e.g., ask a question, tell a story using an example, cut some data out to make your speech shorter).

- ❑ Using analogies that make the concepts come alive. The ability to "come alive" is a function of instructor charisma and a key tool you can use. People personalize concepts and buy into them if the analogies used are:
 - Apt,
 - Within attendees' realms of experience, and
 - Enjoyable.

The more analogies we use on a single concept (time permitting), the greater will be the percentage of the audience that buys in.

- ❑ Try to time your group's high point on the dynamic curve so it occurs just at adjournment. Your presentation should reach its peak or generate the most excitement or interest just before the conclusion.
- ❑ Establish a connection to gain audience attention and build rapport. What things do you have in common with the audience? Can you refer to a recent popular movie, television show, or something about the city where you are speaking?
- ❑ Never try to cram a longer presentation into a shorter one. When someone says that they have a "one-hour presentation they need to give in 15 minutes," what they really need to do is design a 15-minute presentation.
- ❑ Use the principle of instantiation—illustrate abstract concepts with a concrete example (e.g., "one serving of rice is equal to the size of my fist").
- ❑ Build your credibility by shifting from the language of tentativeness to the language of certainty. Instead of saying "I think" or "I believe," substitute "I know" or "You can see."

Know what you want to accomplish.

Avoid starting a presentation with "I'm going to talk about . . ." as it lacks focus. Instead, ask yourself about the purpose of your talk. "By the end of my presentation, I want my audience to . . ."

Most presentations can be broken into three segments:

1. An introduction to your topic, to inform the audience of what you are going to talk about or to set up the topic in an interesting way;
2. The body of your presentation, to give the details of the topic; and
3. A summary, to wrap up your key points, telling the audience what you want them to do next or reiterating why this is an important subject.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS?

Louie's presentation garnered him a standing ovation! He was clear, concise, articulate, organized, and enthusiastic. Many people came up to him afterward to congratulate him, ask a question, give him their business cards, or arrange a meeting. It was impressive to see how much he had learned about

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improving his presentation methods and how he integrated the presentation techniques into his own style.

As I left the room, I overheard two audience members: "Wow—that was remarkable! I've heard this guy speak before at another program. He rambled, was unorganized, unfocused, and painful to watch. I wasn't expecting much."

The true measures of success in making a persuasive presentation are whether the presentation accomplishes the goals the presenter has set and whether it satisfied the desires or needs the members of the audience had when they decided to attend the presentation. Presenters who measure up will be invited back to tell their stories.

*A nationally recognized speaker, trainer, and author, **Joni Daniels** is principal of Daniels & Associates, providing solutions to training needs and presenting programs on personal and professional development. An instructor in management topics at the Wharton School's Small Business Development Center, she has successfully addressed a wide variety of audiences, has written a variety of articles, serves as a resource for a variety of business publications and TV and radio programs, and is frequently quoted on management topics. She is the author of Power Tools for Women®: Plugging into the Essential Skills for Life and Work (Three Rivers Press, 2002) and can be reached via her Web site at www.jonidaniels.com.*