



Business presentations should inform and motivate the audience. Yet this is often not the case. Frequently, people with a high level of technical knowledge on a subject have great difficulty in presenting their material to a group. The most common mistakes they make include:

- Using a one-way 'lecture' style of presentation
- Poor use of audiovisual aids
- Pitching the presentation too high or too low
- Being unable to deal with their 'nerves'
- Being swamped by a 'difficult' audience
- Being just plain boring

To help overcome these difficulties, listed below are the six key factors to bear in mind when presenting to a group.

1. The First Few Moments

Whatever the style of the opening, there are two key tasks that all presenters should do in the first few moments of their presentation.

- a) Some time always needs to be invested by the presenter finding out about the audience - what they already know about the topic, what they are expecting from the presentation, and any particular concerns, problems or issues they want dealt with. This information can be obtained through a series of quick questions and answers (audience answers can even be given by raising of hands to questions, such as 'Just so that I have some idea of where you are at, would you just raise a hand if you have heard of XYZ?').
- b) Presenters should always give an outline of the structure and duration of their presentation. This allows the audience to know where the presentation is going. This also enables the presenter to refer back to the structure at various parts of the presentation.

2. Audience Involvement

A major reason why presentations fail is because of lack of audience involvement. Research consistently shows that audience attention drops off after approximately 15 minutes of straight

talking or lecturing, with no involvement. Retention of material is dramatically increased when audience involvement supplements straight talking.

Audience involvement can take many forms, including:

- Audience discussion prompted by questions
- Case studies, role plays, exercises and other types of activities
- Brainstorming, etc

When you want to stimulate a discussion with questions, there are several important hints to bear in mind:

- Ask the question and then use silence to wait for the answer. Many experienced discussion leaders can't stand more than one second's silence (they believe the question has 'flopped'). They proceed to answer their own question or move onto another question.
- Ask the question and show interest in the answer - make eye contact, face the person, nod your head, say 'uh-huh', use appropriate facial gestures like smiling, frowning, or looking surprised.

As presenter, you must always control the discussion. This may involve:

- Asking one person to wait while another finishes his or her point
- Winding up a discussion between two group members and throwing open the discussion to others
- Terminating one discussion topic and moving on to another

The degree of control you will need to exercise will depend on the group, the topic, the amount of time available and the value of the discussion. Too many presenters feel that as long as a group is having a discussion, all is well. This is not good enough. A discussion is only worth having if it is engaging, relevant and useful to most of the audience.

3. Use Visuals

The best way to show aspects of a presentation is via use of audiovisual aids such as whiteboards,

flip charts, overhead projection, slides and videos, models and handouts.

When using whiteboards, flip charts and overheads, the most common error is to clutter them up too much.

Remember, visuals will make any presentation more interesting and memorable.

4. Read the Group

A good presenter is constantly looking for information and feedback from the audience in order to evaluate progress of the presentation. Is the group bored? Are they confused? Are they restless? Are they enthralled?

Most of these questions can be answered by looking at the group's body language. Fidgeting, doodling, glazed eyes and yawning are all good signs that the presentation is not hitting the mark. As obvious as this may appear, many presenters seem to ignore these signs and just rattle on and on.

If you have read the group and things are not going well, change gear. Maybe you need to throw in an impromptu discussion-leading question or another involving activity.

Alternatively, negative signs from the group could require you to pause the presentation and ask for some honest feedback about how things are going. If the group does tell you the presentation is too theoretical, or too boring, or too complex or simple, or whatever, negotiate some changes with the group and then proceed. Your audience will love you for it.

5. Maintain Control

Managing the group dynamics of an audience is always one of the most challenging aspects of making presentations.

In particular, responding to questions from an audience requires careful management. Below are some practical suggestions.

- You should control when questions are to be asked (at any time during your presentation; after each main section; at the end of your presentation). You set the ground rules at the start of your presentation. (It can be tactically advantageous to ask the audience if they agree to your suggestion. They will usually agree!)
- Before answering a question, you may need to restate the question (especially if not all members of the audience have heard it or it was unclear).
- Do not react negatively (especially non-

verbally) to any question. It is important to show respect no matter how 'stupid' the question appears to you.

- After you have answered, check that the questioner has understood your answer and is satisfied. If he or she appears not to be, find out why not and try to fix the situation. This demonstrates that you are concerned that your audience needs are met, and this builds your credibility.
- Sometimes it may be appropriate not to give the answer yourself, but instead 'throw it back' to the group for discussion. This is particularly useful in the case where there is no simple answer, or where the answer is something the audience would know. If, having thrown the question back to the audience, no answer emerges, make sure you supply the answer yourself.
- If you don't know the answer, do not fudge it. Your credibility generally increases when you admit you do not have the answer to a question. (You can always offer to find out and get back to the person later.)
- Do not let any one group member dominate questioning. If this is happening when asking, 'Any questions?', look away from the dominating person towards other members of the group, thereby signalling non-verbally your desire to hear from others in the group. If necessary, you may have to say to the dominator 'Fred, before I take your question, I am wondering if anyone else in the group wants to raise any issues'. This respectfully tells Fred to hold onto his question for a while.
- Control irrelevant or tangential questions, especially if short of time. You can respectfully offer to discuss the question with the person after the presentation is over. (ie. 'Jan, I'd rather not deal with this issue right now as we have fairly limited time. Maybe you and I could talk during the tea break. Is that OK?')
- If you have invited questions, but no-one has any, you can:
 - move onto the next point of the presentation or wind up
 - rephrase the question (eg. 'How many of you have experienced this problem?')
 - pose a situation or scenario to the group and ask them how they would handle it.

6. Push for Action

Towards the end of any presentation, it can be extremely important to get the audience to commit to some action. It may be to make a decision, to

make a change in the way things are done, or whatever. This can be most usefully done by the presenter asking appropriate questions of the group, for example, 'Where do you see this going from here?' or 'What do you want to do next?'

When any sort of behavioural or attitudinal change is required, brainstorming ideas and writing them on a flip chart can personalise this process by pushing individuals in the audience to actually identify what they will do different for themselves.

REFERENCE

Presenting to a Group, a video training package produced by Ash.Quarry Productions and distributed by Seven Dimensions Pty Ltd, ph: +61 3 9686 9677.

For more free articles and online resources, be sure to visit Seven Dimensions' website at
www.7dimensions.com.au.