

12 March 2007

### **Professionally Speaking**

*What makes a good presenter...? Is it just knowledge or something else?*

Computer literacy apart, presentation skills are becoming mandatory to survive in workplaces. Presenters who are inviting, engaging and informative impress people especially employees. Like most functions in business, presentations are formulaic that need to be acquired. Public speaking offers a great opportunity to convey thoughts, to teach, to convince and to enlighten. This holds regardless of whether the presenter is presenting a research paper to scientists at a national meet, or a budget proposal to a senior executive's group.

#### **Planning**

The four W's (why, who, what and where) and the one H (how) are critical to any presentation. The presenter should know the kind and the number of audience attending his presentation.

What is the purpose of the presentation? Is it to explain a plan or project; to tell people what to do - and how; report some event; get support for an idea; define or solve a problem; gain consensus for a decision; provide training; or encourage and motivate? Every presentation has a purpose and the presenter should be aware of it. Presentations could be used to motivate, inform or advertise. The presenter should know which category his work falls into.

Why are they here? Most often people attend presentations not because they want to but because they have been deputed to. Hence, their query, "What's in it for me?" The presenter must therefore have a definite purpose for his talk. The venue of the presentation is another significant aspect of a presentation. So are the acoustics of the room.

#### **Practice**

A presentation must be well rehearsed. No presentation ought to be read from handheld notes, or handouts. The presenter should know the content well enough to establish constant eye contact with the audience. This will make him appear knowledgeable, friendly.

#### **Performing**

A good presentation has a clear introduction and an icebreaker such as a story, interesting statement or fact, joke, quotation, or an activity for warm up. The introduction is based on an objective, that is, the purpose or goal of the presentation. This amply prepares the audience, as they know what to expect. A presentation should be organized for maximum impact. It should invariably have a strong beginning, a logical middle, and conclusion. Finally, the audience should feel that the presenter has delivered what he promised.

#### **The beginning**



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### *Grab the attention of the audience*

Very often, the introductory words are lost amidst the settling audience. The attention of the audience should not get divided between the presentation and things like latecomers locating or adjusting their seats. The presenter should begin only after the audience has settled down.

### *Present a structure*

The audience should be informed about the duration of the presentation, so that they plan their schedules accordingly. The presenter should also briefly talk of how he plans to proceed with the presentation. The audience will know thus know what to expect and will concentrate on the proceedings.

### *Create a rapport*

The presenter must create a relationship with the audience at the beginning itself. If he is able to win the audience in the first few minutes he can be assured that his audience will stay glued throughout the presentation.

### *Visual aids*

No one would want to listen to someone talk endlessly. Appealing visuals also arouse the interest of the audience.

Visual aids could be in the form of transparencies or computer graphics. However, mixed media is best avoided. Inevitably, the sequence doesn't work as planned, and the distractions destroy the presentation. The presenter could distribute handouts in the beginning. The audience will not be required to take notes. The sequence though must be maintained lest the shuffling of paper should disturb the talk. The speaker should remember to talk to the audience not to the visual aids!

### *Humor*

The set piece joke can work very well, but it can also lead to disaster. Apt anecdotes/jokes must be chosen, at no point should any member of the audience be offended. That rules out all racist, sexist and snide jokes. Amusing asides are equally useful in relieving the seriousness.

### **The ending**

An audience seldom forgets conclusive statements. So the last few sentences should be planned with care. As with the beginning, it is necessary to catch the attention of the audience, which might have wandered. This requires a change of pace, a new visual aid or perhaps the introduction of a final culminating idea. Some speakers end with a summary of the points (without stating it: one of the greatest mistakes is to tell the audience that this is a summary because the audience will simply switch off). The end should ideally be unexpected with a final vital phrase left hanging in the air ringing round their memories. Alternatively, the end can be a flourish, with the pace and voice leading the audience through the final crescendo to the inevitable conclusion. The ending can be motivational, challenging, thoughtful, or a reiteration of a point.



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### **Post Mortem**

Once the presentation is over the presenter should honestly evaluate his performance. A member of the audience can help decide the least successful aspect of the presentation (that could be resolved in subsequent talks). Only then will he know whether the problem is associated with the content, or with the delivery.