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Master Your Message, Maximize Your Impact

ON PRESENTATION SKILLS



AUGUST 2015

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Contents

The Multiple Wins of Setting Presentation Standards	3
Presenter Benefits	
Audience Benefits	
Company Benefits	
Management & Staff Benefits	
Know Your Audience (or they'll know you don't)	5
Ask Your Audience	
Set Up Interviews	
Take the Edge Off	
Be Informed about Diversity	
Creating Presentation Structure & Objectives	8
Name the Objectives	
"But I'm 'Merely Informing' Them"	
Structure: Chronological or Contrasts	
Rule of 3	
Prove It	
Wrap It Up	
"And Then Something Amazing Happened": Engaging Your Audience	11
Write Your Own Speaker Introduction	
Grabber Openers	
How to Create Visuals That Work	13
Composition	
Delivery	
Red Flags	
Presentation Checklist	17
Before the Event	
During the Event	
After the Event	

The Multiple Wins of Setting Presentation Standards

“I appreciate your suggestions, Coach, but I think I’ve got this football thing down now.”

— PEYTON MANNING

OK, we admit it. We made up the quote just to get your attention—and to make the point that no matter their sport, professional athletes, the best of the best, understand the importance of continuous improvement. Those who are driven to excellence never stop seeking opportunities to improve. In fact, they expect it—to stay on top of their game.

Similarly, in the world of business, people who are responsible for conveying their company’s messages flourish when given the support they need to go from passable presenters to expert communicators. The presentation skills they acquire enable them to speak effectively to ten people in a boardroom or one thousand people in a stadium.

Some organizations, however, don’t have programs or best practices in place to help their people improve their presentations. Their presenters are left to do as best they can, on their own, unguided. Predictably, the results are a crapshoot.

Let’s look at a typical example. A company taps one of its subject-matter experts, “Bob,” to give a presentation to prospective customers. In preparation, he spends most of his time developing the content. If he eventually decides to rehearse his talk, he might pull a colleague or two into a conference room and ask them to watch and give suggestions.

At most, Bob's co-workers might offer a few helpful points about content—"Bob, recheck those fourth-quarter numbers" or "There's a typo on your closing slide." But, because the organization has no formal presentation processes, Bob's colleagues don't notice the weakness of Bob's opening... his failure to use language that would make his influential audience feel more included and understood... his overreliance on reading from his slides... his underwhelming close... and various other missteps.

And because Bob's rehearsal observers don't know how to tactfully address his slow pace and REM-sleep-inducing monotone, they compliment his shoes.

Unfortunately for Bob, and his company, what should be a high-impact presentation may become a missed opportunity. Yet when organizations have clear processes and ongoing support for presentation excellence, the benefits are many and far-reaching:

Presenters gain insights from unbiased, objective feedback of their impact. They gain skills targeted to their needs and confidence that comes with those skills. And the better they become in their presentations, the greater their opportunities to speak and be perceived by their audience(s) as leaders. Plus, the skills they learn when preparing for a particular talk can be applied to optimize any talk—inside or outside the organization.

Audiences appreciate the presenter's clarity, concision, and demonstrated understanding of their interests and needs, which increases their likelihood of taking action. Their positive perception of the presenter also influences their view of the company.

Unfortunately for Bob, and his company, what should be a high-impact presentation may become a missed opportunity. Yet when organizations have clear processes and ongoing support for presentation excellence, the benefits are many and far-reaching

The company enjoys a competitive advantage through a more strategic and persuasive approach to its presentations, and this results in more buy-in of initiatives, products, or services. High-impact presenters are the company's brand ambassadors, a source of pride.

Management and staff are able to spot the differences between presenters in their organization who are modeling the best practices and those who are not. As a result, the bar is raised for the expectations of presentation excellence throughout the culture.

As you can see, effectively building and delivering high-impact presentations offers ROI beyond just the professional development of the presenters. There are benefits to be realized up, down, across, and outside an organization.

For the record, what Peyton Manning really said was, “The head coach tells us what to do, and we follow his orders.” Though most presentation-skills curricula or best practices won’t “give orders,” the effective ones will help the presenters win. And, as this article shows, when the presenters win, so does everybody else.

Know Your Audience (or they’ll know you don’t!)

Question: You’ve just accepted an invitation or assignment to give a presentation. What is the very next thing you should do?

- a. Develop your outline.
- b. Create your slides.
- c. Pick out what you’ll wear to feel at your best.
- d. Discover everything you can about your audience and its needs.

Answer: If you picked a, b or c, lean closer — you really need to read this post!

Job #1 for every presenter is to show respect for the audience by speaking directly to its interests and needs. If a presentation does not in some way reward the audience for their attention, it is almost certainly a waste of time.

Whether you’re planning to give a 10-minute talk or a 45-minute keynote address, ask yourself: What value can I bring the audience? How can I make their time spent with me worthwhile? In most cases, the only way to know the answer is to ...

Ask Your Audience

If you are presenting to your peers or to a segment of your company that you know well, your familiarity gives you an advantage. Even so, let some of them know in advance the purpose of your presentation. Ask if there’s any content they’d like to see included. They could wind up giving you suggestions you hadn’t considered, enabling you to hit all the right notes.

For audiences you don’t know as well, research is essential. Start with their website. Begin with their Mission and Values statements: is it important that your talk aligns with these? If so, how could you show a link (subtly or directly) between their mission and values and yours?

Click on the company’s media pages to view their news and press releases. Have they made any recent announcements that you could reference in your remarks? What initiatives are they working toward that you should know about, if not comment on? When you show yourself to be informed about your audience, you earn their respect. And when they respect you, they’re more willing to buy in to your message.

Set up Interviews

Just as we recommended for audiences of peers, ask to set up “discovery” calls with a cross section of your audience. Prepare questions for them that will help you understand their needs, and target your presentation accordingly. Give them an overview of your topic/ message (e.g., “I’ll be talking about ways that companies can step up their environmental sustainability practices”), and ask for their thoughts on it. Here are a few examples:

- What would make this topic most relevant for your department?
For your company as a whole? For yourself?
- What parts of my topic might the group already support?
Could you provide examples of that support? Which parts might get resistance?
- Have you seen presentations before on similar topics?
What did you like or not like about them?
- May I mention to the group that we spoke?

If you are presenting to your peers or to a segment of your company that you know well, your familiarity gives you an advantage.

If your goal is to persuade the audience, try to talk with some of the most influential members of the group. At the very least, find out who the decision makers are.

Take the edge off

Another advantage of talking with audience members in advance: it takes the edge off. You won’t be speaking to a room full of total strangers. You’ll feel more like part of the team, and you’ll maybe even have an ally or two. (Allies help build your credibility.) Case in point: To prepare for a commencement address a colleague of ours was asked to give at an arts college, he conducted 5-10-minute interviews with a dozen members of the graduating class, discovering their plans and dreams. He then wove into his script short but sparkling highlights of what he heard from those students.

If your goal is to persuade the audience, try to talk with some of the most influential members of the group. At the very least, find out who the decision makers are.

When he delivered his remarks on graduation day, he could sense the audience's surprise and delight that he was that he was sharing stories about some of the graduates he'd made it important to meet. Their appreciation was palpable, and it quickly put him at ease—a good thing when speaking to 1,000 people!

Be informed about diversity

When developing your presentation, consider whether it would be helpful to know the male-female ratio of your audience, or the range of their ethnicities and ages. Let's take a look at each factor and how it might inform your preparation:

Gender. Sports analogies can be effective ways to get across some messages, to some audiences. But if you're using football parallels to make your points to an audience of three men and fourteen women, your analogy could fall flat for the majority (and cast you as being out of touch). Tailor your talk so that you can connect with most, if not all, of your listeners.

Ethnicity. If you're using stock photos in your slides, make sure that people of different ethnicities are represented. A failure to be inclusive conveys a lack of respect. Show that you're mindful that the world is indeed a global marketplace.

Age. Using cultural references that are meaningful for 20-somethings is great... but only for 20-somethings. Similarly, making a point about leadership by showing a clip of George C. Scott from the movie Patton will probably be "lame" for everyone under 50. Make it important to know whether your audience is within the same age range or includes a wide mix of ages. And then plan your approach accordingly.

Do your homework. Get to know your audience. When you do, they'll know it. Whatever your presentation goals, it's good to have the audience on your side.

Creating Presentation Objectives and Structure

Congratulations! Your presentation is on the calendar. You've done your homework by talking with a sampling of your audience to find out how you could speak to their interests and needs. All you have to do now is plan the best way to get from "Good morning" to "In conclusion. ...". In this article you'll find tips on how to navigate that journey, by developing clear objectives and a solid structure.

Name the objectives

When a presenter rambles, he or she has lost sight of the objective (if it was ever clear in the first place!). Is your purpose to persuade the audience to take action? Prepare them for change? Justify a decision? Update, educate, or entertain them? Your objectives will inform the content and structure of your entire presentation, so be clear about what they are.

But I'm "merely informing" them!

If your task is mainly to inform listeners, how do you want them to feel about the information? How do you wish to interpret the information for them? In his position as a senior director of finance, "David" gave presentations that were mostly dry, highly technical reports of his company's figures and projections. His senior management was considering him for a significant promotion, but it came with a condition: David had to move beyond his sleepy "just the facts" style and find ways to engage the audience by making the information consistently clear and meaningful, if not actionable.

His company assigned him a coach who showed David how to connect with listeners in a more-personable way while still being true to his analytical style. He learned as well how to skillfully guide audiences through the various number trails, helping them make sense of terminology and charts that formerly had left them feeling lost. He also discovered how to tie in his numbers presentations with the company's big picture, thus enhancing the perception of him as a leader (rather than a bright but boring reporter). He got the promotion.

For ideas on how to transform a report into rapport, check out the article in this series "And Then Something Amazing Happened: Engaging Your Audience."

Structure: Chronological or Contrasts?

Whether or not you're telling actual stories, presentations are basically storytelling: you structure your message in an order that makes sense, is easy to follow, and has the impact that will meet your objectives. The most common presentation structures are built on either chronology or contrasts:

Chronological. Choose a chronological structure if your aim is to show the linear development of something, such as products or initiatives. This structure is effective when you want to show timelines, processes, or any topic involving “how we got from A to B.” A physical therapist, for example, might share the story of her patient who had been crippled in a car crash and the weekly efforts that ultimately got him walking again. Her presentation would be chronological even if she began her presentation with the outcome — the fully rehabilitated patient—and then took her listeners through the story of what it took to achieve that. If your topic has a logical progression, a chronological structure is the logical choice.

Contrasts. If your content is about the comparison of opposites, such as A versus B, you’ll want a structure that highlights and builds on those contrasts. Consider the contrasts inherent in the following:

Myths & Facts: exposes a series of falsehoods or misunderstandings about the topic, followed by the facts and realities

Pros & Cons: presents the carefully researched benefits and costs of a subject under evaluation

Today & Tomorrow: depicts what is versus what could (or will) be, the ideal structure for presentations conveying goals and vision

Problem & Solution: the most common structure for sales and other persuasive presentations involving a call to action

Challenges & Opportunities: similar to Problem & Solution but could be evaluative or persuasive

Naturally there are times when the two categories of structures overlap. For example, a chronological structure might also reference contrasts such as Myths & Facts; a Today & Tomorrow structure may include a chronological timeline. Once your topic and objectives are firm, the right structure will become apparent.

It’s not enough to simply state opinions or make assertions. You owe it to your audience to be credible.

The Rule of 3

Our brains are wired for triads. We expect a beginning, a middle, and an end. We remember our social security numbers not as nine continuous digits but as three sets of three digits. Marketers promise “in just 3 steps!” so as not to scare away customers.

The Rule of 3 applies as well to presentation structure:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them (including its importance to them and the actions, if any, you'll want them to take).
2. Tell them.
3. Tell them what you told them.

It's an effective framework that creates an instant comfort level for the audience by setting their expectations.

The Rule of 3 also applies to the odds that an audience will tend to remember only three key ideas. So give them three. Anything more than that and you risk losing them. Keep it simple. If your goal is to tell them what time it is, do it without telling them how to build a clock!

The person who introduces you (the host) sets the initial tone and expectations for your talk. Don't leave that lead-in to chance. Write your own intro, and offer it to the host to read aloud.

Prove It!

It's not enough to simply state opinions or make assertions. You owe it to your audience to be credible. Validate your points through facts, evidence, case studies, examples, personal experiences, testimonials, the conclusions of experts, or other supports. We'll explore these as engagement techniques in a subsequent article.

Wrap It Up

Audiences tend to remember the last things they heard, so be sure to end strong. Here are a few ways to do that:

Summarize Key Points: "I've shown you how this program will enable us to bring critical health care services to rural Africans living in poverty, especially in Malawi, one of its poorest countries. We also looked at how the health needs of women, in particular, are underserved and at the devastating impact on children when their mothers fall ill. And as we saw in the video, this health initiative is projected to reduce the mortality rate by up to 40 percent."

Final Call to Action: "I hope I've been able to show you the value of the employee recognition event I've proposed for next summer. If so, I'd like to take a few moments now to hear your ideas for how best to move forward with it."

Together, clear objectives, logical structure, (no more than three) key messages, compelling proof points, and a strong close provide the foundation for an excellent presentation. It's your job now to make these elements as engaging for your audience as possible. We'll explore how to do that next.

“Then Something Amazing Happened”: Engaging Your Audience

What’s worse than a rude audience?

A polite one. You know the type. Their smiles and eye contact seem encouraging, but in reality their brains are busy entertaining thoughts of *anything but you!* And when they applaud at the close, it’s merely polite.

No thanks!

Naturally, you can’t guarantee that every audience member will be 100 percent focused on you (it’s that free-will thing), but in this article we’ll look at how to significantly increase the odds that they *will*. How? Through the use of effective engagement techniques. It’s your job to engage your audience. If you succeed, your audience will love you. Even better, they’ll feel involved in your presentation.

Write Your Own Speaker Introduction

Many speakers think their presentation begins when they greet the audience. Not so. It begins with the introduction. The person who introduces you (the host) sets the initial tone and expectations for your talk. Don’t leave that lead-in to chance. Write your own intro, and offer it to the host to read aloud—he or she will appreciate the support and be glad not to have to “wing it.”

Here are some guidelines:

Keep it short. Avoid a recitation of your résumé: highlight experiences and accomplishments that relate directly to your topic, build your credibility, and can be summarized in under a minute.

Create a teaser. Don’t steal your own thunder: let your intro hint at what’s to come without giving away any major points or conclusions. Include the mention of at least one benefit that the audience will derive from your talk. Write a teaser that’ll keep that guy in the back row from slipping out to make a phone call.

Review pronunciations. Meet with the host, however briefly, to flag any tricky words or names in your intro: “Our next presenter holds a Ph.D. from Czielowicz Scheczynry University” may require a phonetic assist. They’ll appreciate your intervention!

Make it appropriate. Decide who’s the focus of your intro: if you’re representing your organization, your intro should be about your organization and your role in it. Personal data (“Mr. Hill lives in River City, Iowa, where he and his wife, Marian, enjoy ...”) makes sense only if your talk is a personal one.

Grabber Openers

Remember when TV shows began with theme songs (“It’s the story of a man named Brady”)? Yet no show in the last 10 years has opened with one. Today’s competitive networks know that unless the action starts immediately, viewers will flip the channel. Likewise, the first few moments of your talk are when your audience decides if you and your topic are worth their attention... or if they’re going to mentally change stations. Consider the options below for keeping your audience tuned in. While these tactics make for strong openers, you can also use them throughout your presentation, especially when transitioning between sections.

If you can show a product in action, by all means do so. Nothing beats a live demonstration to capture the audience attention and prove the item’s effectiveness.

Provocative statements. Provided it’s relevant to your topic, of course, say something that surprises or challenges the audience or shocks them out of their complacency. Maybe it’s a startling fact or point of view. When you see their eyes widen and eyebrows raise, you’ll know you’ve got ‘em where you want ‘em.

“By the year 2020, you could pay up to \$4 to mail a standard letter in the U.S. I’m going to show you how that could happen—and why it doesn’t have to.”

Quotations. The internet is rich with sources for quotations, from funny to fact-based and from provocative to profound. A well-chosen quotation can help lend instant authority to your premise. Consider memorizing the quote you select, especially if it sums up something essential to your talk. If it’s a lengthy quote, show it on a slide.

“As Abraham Lincoln said, “The Internet is not always a reliable source of facts.”

Stories & Anecdotes. Everyone loves a good story. Whether it’s the story of how Facebook was founded or how you and your family survived a hurricane in Honduras, we human beings love to learn about, and through, the experiences of others. The best stories, regardless of their subjects, have in them some degree of suspense that keeps the listeners wondering, “And then what happened?” The right story can be more persuasive, and memorable, than the most reasoned arguments.

“Imagine my panic just three weeks ago, on March 26th, when I was awakened at 3:00 a.m. by a phone call. From a client!”

Tough questions. Asking the audience a seemingly unanswerable question... letting the question sink in... and then providing the answer is a form of “tension and release.” The audience is pulled in by the question but feels slightly uneasy until it has been resolved and depends on the speaker to resolve it for them.

“What goes on in the mind of soldiers who return home after years as POWs and find themselves unable to relate to family and friends, the very people who are essential for their ongoing support?”

Polls. Conducting a poll creates instant interactivity. Pose the question and then ask for a show of hands, or ask the audience to stand or sit in response to the question. Besides involving the audience, polls give you immediate data about them, which could help inform where you “take them” in your presentation. Be aware, however, that too many polling questions could be seen as tiresome and gimmicky.

“Please stand if you have needed tech support in the last 12 months.”

Props. On her TV show, a newly svelte Oprah Winfrey once famously illustrated her dramatic weight loss by pulling a wagon heaped with animal fat equal to the pounds she had shed. Oprah’s wagonload “told” the whole story. What prop(s) could work well within your presentation to make it more memorable, if not more fun? Consider a literal item, such as a jar of soybeans in a talk on agriculture or an analogous prop such as a golf club to illustrate for a sales team the importance of continuously improving one’s game.

“You may be wondering why I’m wearing this crash helmet.”

Demos. If you can show a product in action, by all means do so. Nothing beats a live demonstration to capture the audience attention and prove the item’s effectiveness. Invite your audience to engage with the demo. If the product is too large to bring to the presentation space, show a video.

“Who would like to come up here and try it for themselves?”

Once you start using engagement techniques, you’ll have more impact--and more fun as a presenter. Your audience will appreciate your efforts to engage them and begin looking forward to your next presentations. And that reminds us of a story ...

How to Create Visuals That Work

A good presentation is remembered long after Q&A. And when it comes to memory, the eyes have it. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only 10 percent of the information we retain is through oral communication, yet 35 percent comes through visual means. A combination of the two accounts for 65 percent of what we remember.

Without well-designed visuals and the ability to talk about them effectively, even a charismatic content expert can lose his or her audience. In this article we’ll look at three key factors for creating and delivering visual aids effectively: Composition, Delivery, and paying attention to Red Flags.

Composition

The effective use of visuals makes it easy for an audience to understand, remember, and in some cases act upon your message. Here are the guidelines to make your next visual presentation your best:

Allow white space. Don't fill up the entire slide with imagery and text. Take a "less is more" approach to your design. Slides that are too busy can intimidate, bore, or confuse an audience. When in doubt, use more graphics than text. Include no more than six lines of text per slide and no more than six words per line.

Use images only. Slides are a visual medium, and visuals have the power to evoke emotional responses that connect audience to message, memorably. Strive to reduce the need for your audience to read *anything*. Aim to eliminate bullets and to tell your story through photos, graphs, charts, drawings, or video. Pictures engage the brain and trigger meaningful associations that words cannot.

If you MUST use text ...

Make it easy to read. Use a 24-point font to ensure the visibility of the text. Sans serif fonts are generally easier to read. And because people read from left to right, be sure your design positions key information at the right (or center).

Use simple language. Make your text read like headlines, avoiding full sentences unless you're directly quoting a person or a study. Drop small connecting words such as a, an, and the, and whittle the idea down to its gist. For example, the sentence "We expect there will be more changes in the near future" becomes "more changes soon."

Use color. Use color not only for visual appeal but to make it easier for viewers to see distinctions between concepts and to track data. On a graph showing, for example, the current and projected sales of a product and its time to market, assigning each category its own color could help the audience more quickly decipher the meanings of the various lines and arrows.

Keep it moving. Don't let the audience read ahead of you. Create a "build" that adds each image or line of text or image gradually, as you're ready for it. Explore the many tools available for keeping your slides lively through simple, eye-catching animations.

Be consistent. Be sure to use the same (or two well-paired) fonts throughout your slide show. Decide whether you'll use periods at the ends of text bullets and then follow that style for each slide. Be consistent as well with your use of capital letters. When you've completed your slides, ask a few people to review them for content clarity, logical flow, and style consistency.

Slides are a visual medium, and visuals have the power to evoke emotional responses that connect audience to message, memorably. Strive to reduce the need for your audience to read *anything*.

Cultural inclusion. When choosing stock photography for your slides, be sure the faces represent a gender balance and a mix of ethnicities. When presenters fail to be inclusive, they risk alienating members of the audience. And that can be costly.

Video. Video offers the powerful advantage of bringing people, locations, and emotion into your presentation, enhancing your message. Showing customer testimonials, for example, is far more effective than merely capturing their quotations on-screen. Given the persuasive power of “seeing is believing,” video can lend instant credibility to a presentation and make it memorable.

Delivery

It’s the job of the presenter to control the flow of the presentation as well as the focus of the audience. In the following section we’ll explore how to work with your visuals in ways that enable you to control the flow and focus to keep your listeners engaged.

Talk to your audience, not your visuals. Many presenters make the mistake of talking to their slides and losing their connection with the audience. You should know your slides well enough that you need only to glance at them. Stay open for eye contact.

Speak to the ideas; don’t read the text. The audience doesn’t need you to read aloud what they can plainly read for themselves. (An exception to this might be a lengthy quotation that the audience expects you to read as they follow along.) Reading text verbatim makes you appear overly dependent on your slides and can undermine your authority on the subject. Talk about the ideas captured in the slide, rather than reading the text word for word. A sparse use of text will help you accomplish this.

Avoid fillers. The next time you’re watching a presentation, notice how many times the presenter transitions to each slide with “Okay” or “So.” Such words are known as “fillers” because they enable the presenter to fill a silence as he or she gathers her thoughts for what’s next. Fillers quickly become bad habits for presenters and annoying for listeners. Instead of using a filler, simply pause. A pause shows poise, control, and professionalism. Finish your last sentence, take a breath, and set up the next slide. You’ll feel and sound more confident.

Set ‘em up. Give a brief preview of the slide before you show it. For example, “In the next slide you’ll see how we’re going to solve the problem I’ve just described” or “How did our customers respond? Let’s take a look.” Preparing the audience for what they’re about to see creates anticipation. It also gives them a context for the slide so they can more easily follow your narrative.

Interpret. Never assume that the audience understands the meaning of your charts and graphs. Neither should you assume that they will ask you to explain what they find confusing, as many adults are wary of asking questions they fear could make them look slow or uninformed. You must act as interpreter. Spell it out for them: “The blue line means x, the green line is y, and the triangles represent z. Therefore. ...”

Go to black. When you have finished discussing a slide, bring the screen to black (by hitting the “B” key). A content-filled screen can pull audience attention away from you. Control where their attention goes. As an alternative to black, consider using a neutral placeholder such as a theme graphic or logo.

Use flipcharts smartly. Flipcharts are great for literally drawing pictures for the audience and capturing their input during interactive segments. Use colored pens to make visual distinctions between the various ideas or concepts. (Avoid red—it’s difficult to read from a distance). Talk as you write to avoid “dead air.” For subsequent references, tape each page to the wall as you complete it. Because flipchart segments have a “roll up our sleeves” feeling to them, it’s better to write quickly than try to make it look pretty.

Preparing the audience for what they’re about to see creates anticipation. It also gives them a context for the slide so they can more easily follow your narrative.

Red Flags

Creating a visually interesting and logical slide composition is an important first step. Now let’s take a look at some “red flags” when creating and using visual aids.

Conversion issues. Fact: slides that look perfect on one device may change significantly when shown on another device. Margins, text boxes, and spacing are all subject to formatting issues when shared across devices. For this reason it’s essential that you review your slides before showing them on a laptop or tablet other than your own.

Ensure peace of mind. An image found on the Internet is not necessarily safe to use. Fines for using copyrighted imagery can climb into the thousands of dollars. For stock photos and royalty-free images, create an account with image banks such as Getty Images or Shutterstock. To use Google Images safely, enter the image you’re looking for and click “Advanced.” From there you’ll see a pull-down list for “Usage Rights” that includes the category “free to use, share or modify, even commercially.” For more information on staying safe visit [wikihow.com/Avoid-Copyright-Infringement](http://www.wikihow.com/Avoid-Copyright-Infringement).

Don’t trust embedded videos. Maybe it’s Murphy’s Law, but video clips programmed into slide shows often play perfectly in rehearsal but freeze up in the presentation. This phenomenon is so common that most audiences are a little surprised when a slide-embedded video actually works. Have a backup plan for showing video, and then rehearse your backup plan.

Don’t rely on WiFi. The prestige of the business, hotel, or conference center is no guarantee of a reliable connection. Unless your presentation is being produced by a professional meetings and events company, don’t assume you’ll have glitch-free WiFi. Plan your presentation in such a way that a connection failure won’t derail you.

Watch them, not the video. You’ve already seen the video many times, so while it’s playing, watch your audience’s response to it. Do they look engaged or skeptical? Are they taking notes or checking their smartphones? Their nonverbal responses to the video could prove invaluable as you continue your presentation.

Presentation Checklist

So you've been chosen to offer a presentation at your next major sales meeting. Or you volunteered. Or your boss "volunteered" you. No matter how you got here, you're here, and you want to put your best foot forward.

Whether you're a newbie or an old pro, what follows is a "Presenter Checklist" that will enable you to "be prepared."

Pre-Sales Meeting Prep

- How many will be in your audience? This is critical to know if you have handouts or interactivity planned.
- What is the room setup? A single conference table? Theatre style (rows)? Classroom style (tables)? Is there a lectern? Plan your rehearsals accordingly.
- What kind of microphone, if any, will be provided (handheld, headset, lavalier, lectern mic)?
- What is your start and end time? Given your topic, how much time should you allow for Q&A? Will there be a timekeeper?
- Will the audience have name tags or table tents with their names on them? Being able to acknowledge people by name is especially important if you're planning for interactivity or conducting any kind of training.
- Will the room be available for you to rehearse?
- What is the audience attire? If you're a guest speaker, consider wearing full business attire, both as a sign of respect for the audience and to help you feel on top of your game. If you're speaking at your organization, wear what you'd normally wear in that environment. It's always best to dress one step better than (or level with) your audience.
- Who precedes and follows you on the agenda, and what are their topics? What themes or key points of theirs could you acknowledge in your talk to enhance overall program continuity and further support your message?
- Will you be introduced? Unless it's an informal presentation, offer to write your own introduction for the meeting host to read.
- Is there an event theme that your talk must reflect? If you're presenting at a conference, are you expected to use a theme/branded template for your slides? Does the host need to approve slides in advance of the event? Make sure to send your contact person(s) the final copy of your slides as backup.

- Do you plan to make (paper or electronic) copies of your slides available to the audience after your talk? If so, consider whether you could create a smaller, edited version for this purpose.
- Will your talk be videotaped? How will the video be used? Is there anything proprietary in your talk that would make videotaping problematic?
- Will you need a flipchart? If your talk is at a hotel, consider bringing your own flipchart to avoid the astronomical fees hotels charge (to you or the host) for providing one. Bring your own colored pens too!
- Do you have backup batteries for your remote control clicker? Have you packed the connecting cables for your laptop, LCD projector, or other devices?

Rehearsal (Yes, you MUST rehearse)

- Unless you'll be giving a seated presentation (extremely rare), always rehearse standing up.
- Rehearse using your visuals. Become a master at making smooth transitions between each topic/slide. Set clear intentions for how you want to be perceived by your audience, and identify the presentation skills that will support that.
- Don't rehearse in front of the mirror: focus on your message, not on your appearance.
- Audio-record your talk, and listen to it often.
- If possible, rehearse in the actual space of your presentation.
- If possible, rehearse with a professional presentation coach. They will see things you cannot.
- If rehearsing in front of your team, ask a few of them to focus on your content, others on your delivery, and one person to time it.
- Prepare a list of challenging questions you could be asked, and rehearse your responses to them.

So you've been chosen to offer a presentation at your next major sales meeting. Or you volunteered. Or your boss "volunteered" you. No matter how you got here, you're here, and you want to put your best foot forward.

At the Event

- Arrive early for peace of mind. Connect your laptop to the projection system you'll be using, and run through your slides. Once this has been done, you'll feel significantly more prepared and relaxed. This is especially important if your presentation includes sound.
- Create a clean screen on your laptop, removing any visual clutter.
- Silence all of your wireless devices.
- If you have handouts, make sure the right person(s) has them and can distribute them... or do it yourself.
- "Own the room." Mentally and physically claim it as your space, to increase your confidence.
- Mingle with audience members as they arrive. Find your allies. Seek out those you interviewed during your content-planning process.
- Stay hydrated to avoid "dry mouth." Avoid cold water; it can constrict the vocal chords.
- During the Q&A portion of your talk, when an attendee asks a question, repeat it in full for the entire room. This ensures that everyone has heard the question and (most important) gives you time to compose your response.

Postevent

- Privately ask for feedback from the host or members of the audience.
- Create a list of things you did well in your presentation and wish to repeat, as well as a list of snafus or snags you wish to improve.
- If you had any difficulty answering a question, research the answer, and then follow up with the "asker" if you can. Also, if able, share the response with the entire group via email or another internal source.
- Write thanks-yous to the event organizer as well as any audience members whose input in your planning process enabled you to customize the presentation.

Good luck!

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For more information, contact GetSynchronicity at
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