

MAKING WINNING PRESENTATIONS

Talking Your Way to the Top

BY KAREN FRIEDMAN

Asked the reason for their success, top executives who earn more than \$250,000 annually said that their presentation skills are the number one reason they made it to the top.



In a survey, these executives observed how their public speaking skills enabled them to articulate company goals clearly and to present their ideas effectively to senior management and consequently helped them take their careers to the next level.

A top pharmaceutical executive told me, “I work with a lot of terrific people who are exceptional at what they do. But in order for them to take their careers to the next level, senior management needs to see them as leaders who can command attention and respect.” When delivering presentations, he said, these executives must be able to “hit it out of the ballpark.” A

person's ability to present key information clearly and concisely is critical to his or her credibility, and the respect with which he or she is held both internally and externally.

Yet, even top-tier managers privately admit that they are not sure how to effectively deliver data-packed presentations. They acknowledge that their PowerPoint-driven presentations are too long, and lack organization, substance and style. Slightly embarrassed, these executives divulge that their long presentations are the way they are because they are afraid to leave out important information or to personalize their presentations and not be taken seriously.

Most communication coaches will teach executives to craft strong opening and closing remarks, organize the material, develop powerful messages and improve delivery and body language but higher-ups also need to learn how to connect with their audiences. Based on hundreds of coaching sessions and conversations with scores of executives, I have compiled some key tactics and presentation strategies to help executives do this and consequently advance their careers.

Let me share them with you.

A SPEAKER'S TOOL KIT

Get out of your own way. You know your business. This is why you are delivering the presentation. But stop trying to jam ten pounds of information into a two-pound bag just to prove that you know your stuff. Consider how to appeal to your audience's concerns. For instance, if you're talking technology, how will the technology save them time and money? Step out of your shoes and into those of your listeners and talk to them from their perspective and address their concerns.

Leave a lasting impression. People remember impressions, not facts. They remember how you made them feel. When we see stories about the December tsunamis, we don't remember all of the facts. But, we'll never forget the stories, the images and our reaction to the indescribable pictures of death and devastation. People will not warm to your words if you don't appeal to their hearts. You must support facts and figures with examples, anecdotes and visual images that leave a lasting impression.

Don't let questions distress you. It is almost inevitable that management will interrupt your presentation to ask a question. They are not trying to stump you—they want the whole picture. Think of the question as an opportunity to address their concerns and use it as a means to reinforce key points or to deliver important information. You can make it easier on yourself if you identify probable questions and prepare answers in advance.

Remember the three Cs. Obtaining the financing you need to grow your business might require delivering a business presentation to investors before you ask for the money. Your plan and how much it will cost isn't enough. Your presentation must be clear, concise and credible. You must quickly articulate how your company will make money, what you will do to address any problems and how your product or service will benefit customers, then make your appeal for financial support.

No one expects a slide show. Today's business executives often equate the preparation of a speech to the preparation of a slide presentation. Visuals should reinforce what you say, not serve

as your script. The fewer slides you use, the more impact you'll have because you will be free to look at people and engage them. Audiences will look to you to make sense of the information.

Rather than develop your slides and then prepare your presentation around them, prepare your presentation first. Now develop your visuals to support your key messages. Go over your presentation several times. With practice, by the time you speak, you should be able to deliver your remarks without the slides.

PET PEEVES ABOUT BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS

You can come across as a seasoned pro if you also avoid these speaking mistakes.

Get to the point. When you are speaking to senior executives, they want you to get to the point—quickly. When they ask a question, they want a quick answer, not a long-winded response. Often, presenters over-answer management questions because they think a brief response is too simplistic—but less can be more. Long answers frequently dilute messages and open the door to unwanted questions.

Look in control. It's okay to be nervous. But it's not okay to scowl, shuffle your feet, talk to your slides, keep your eyes fixed on only one person, race through your presentation or frequently look at the clock. If you are uncomfortable, you will make your audience uncomfortable, and they will be less likely to listen to what you have to say. A smile really is worth a thousand words.

Project well. Even if it's a small meeting, you want to project in a voice that is strong and authoritative. We've worked with many people who are soft spoken and others who start out strong and then trail off at the end of a sentence. We advise speakers to visualize someone in the back of the room straining to hear them. Do the same. Speak to that person in an effort to better project. Since standing will maximize the richness of your voice, whenever possible stand up to deliver your thoughts.

If you stop to think about it, you can probably recall some memorable business presentations. What is it you remember? What did the speakers have in common? Chances are these presenters were personable and energetic. They were able to quickly cut to the chase and clearly address audience concerns. And, while they more than likely rehearsed their well thought-out, organized, pre-planned and prepared remarks over and over again, they made you feel as if they were simply speaking off the cuff for your benefit. [MW](#)

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