

BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS ARE FOR THE EAR, NOT THE EYE

By Karen Friedman

I walked into a room the other day where some of the country's top oncologists were preparing to launch a new cancer-fighting drug. This was their final step before presenting to the FDA. Given that these men and women are some of the best and the brightest, I thought rehearsals would be a breeze. So, I sat down, pen poised to make a few notes in order to help them fine tune their business presentation, but I was really looking forward to learning about the latest in fighting this disease.

What a letdown! It didn't matter what they said because the audience never heard them. Five articulate presenters, all well dressed, all armed with animated power points and technical grids droned on and on and on. While eyes closed and others pretended to take notes while playing solitaire on their laptops, I wondered how in the world I could help and if I should triple my fee.

Most people are not born presenters. Even the most seasoned speaker battles butterflies and sweaty palms. Realizing that's okay is the first step. Learning how to connect with your audience is key, but many people will never accomplish that goal until they change their attitude. All too often, doctors, scientists, researchers, engineers and other technical types balk at personalizing business presentations. They seem to think it's an insult to their walls of degrees and years of schooling and they fear colleagues won't take them seriously if they deviate from "just the facts". What they have never learned in all of their advanced chemistry and biology classes is that presenting is for the ear, not the eye. Just the facts sounds like an endless thesis being read into a tape recorder. It doesn't work.

WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME?

No matter how many pages are in front of you, how many years and dollars you've spent on research and development, when presenting, your entire project should boil down to one key thought. If you could sum it up in ten seconds, what would you want your audience to know? For example, workers around the country spent the past ten years collecting census data. The statistics and volumes of information are endlessly complex, but their message is short and simple: Fill out the form.

HOW IS YOUR PRESENTATION LAID OUT?

Is your presentation written like a term paper? Is it written in sentences? Does it allow room for pauses and repetition when you want to drum a point home? Your words should not be in sentence structure. People don't speak in sentences. They speak in phrases. If you make notes and bullet points, you will find yourself talking more and reading less. If you allow spaces between key thoughts, you will start to identify missing transitions desperately needed to connect point a to point b to point c. These transitions are like the tick-tock of a clock, giving presentations pace. Without them, the clock stops ticking.

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DO YOUR HARD CORE FACTS AND FIGURES HAVE PERSONALITY?

Presentations are like people. They come in all shapes and sizes and develop their own personalities. Reciting data and revisiting medical trials may be necessary to explain why your product is qualified to come to market, but data without examples has no meaning. Spouting off statistics is boring. Most often, your audience won't remember the actual numbers. Comparing, contrasting and providing visual images to back up those powerful statistics is memorable and brings your business presentations to life.

LESS IS MORE

Overheads and computer graphics should not detract from your message. Too often, presenters put far too much information on the screen when an overhead should compliment what you are saying. Three to five lines with three to five words per line is plenty. Wherever possible, use a picture or moving graph to illustrate technical information. If your audience is too busy sorting through a maze of words on a screen, how can they hear what you're saying?

TECH TALK

It's not about you. It's about your audience. Don't assume that just because your audience is packed with managers and peers, you can talk technical jargon and lingo. You live and breathe your work. They don't necessarily understand the complicated details you are laying out. Remember to explain technical facts in non-technical terms, not rattle or lecture and whenever possible, use analogies, short phrases and visual aids.

By the way, those scientific experts I told you about at the beginning of this article did eventually bring their product to market. There was nothing wrong with the product, but during mock presentation drills, they saw that the audience was confused, had more questions than answers and never got excited about the product. Because the presenters never connected with their audience, there was no take home message, meaning no one really understood how this product differed from others and how this new product could ultimately improve the quality of life of cancer patients. Ultimately, the failure had nothing to do with the product and had everything to do with the presentation.

Having the knowledge to speak does not make you a good speaker. To connect with you, your audience must be energized or moved by what you are saying. They won't be able to do that if you don't give meaning to what you're saying. That happens when you close your eyes and start adapting your material for the ears of others.

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