

Six Keys to Making an Effective Presentation

by **Bill Rosenthal**

Lee Iacocca expressed it well: “You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.” Communispond offers some tips to help you get your ideas across. They will serve you well in any communication situation, whether it is a team meeting, a plan you want to propose to the management committee or a speech at an industry conference.

1. Identify Your Goal

What are you seeking to do? Present information to the audience? Persuade them to your point of view? Motivate them to take action? Plan your communication with a clear understanding of your goal. To get a firm fix on what that is, complete this sentence: “When the meeting is over I want the audience to”

2. Analyze the Audience

Learn everything you can about who will be there. Determine their role and function. Try to identify their level of understanding of your topic. Knowing this will prevent you from talking down to them or, conversely, over their heads. Learn their level of interest in your topic. Do not assume you have an attentive audience. If the audience is required to attend you will have to be especially engaging.

Learn how they will be affected by the plan or recommendation you present, particularly whether they will like it or not. This information will help you describe the payoffs your plan provides the audience members or, conversely, help you defuse as much as possible the audience’s disappointment.

3. Structure the Message

Capture everyone’s attention right at the beginning. You can do this by telling a personal anecdote. Everyone loves a story. You can ask a question, either real or rhetorical. You can present a dramatic statistic. You can make a contrarian statement. All these approaches offer excellent potential. Humor can be risky. Unless you’re very good at it, best leave it to the professional comedians.

Keep it short. Audiences today have shorter attention spans than in the past. Generally, a presentation should not be longer than 20 minutes plus time for the Q&A. You have to limit the number of points you want to get across. Make a list of those points and build on each of them.

As you build, anticipate the questions you will likely be asked and incorporate their answers into your content. If you plan to cite metrics, be certain the audience respects the source. Do not use jargon the

audience may not understand, Dilbert-speak or buzzwords. They are all instant turnoffs. Avoid unnecessary details; you can go into them if asked during the Q&A or later.

Plan the ending. If you are conveying information, state your key points succinctly. If you are presenting a point of view, summarize the reasons why it is sound – from that audience's perspective. If you want the audience to take action, touch on all the reasons why they will get a payoff from it and tell them what to do next.

4. Choose Your Visuals

Visuals are appropriate in some situations, such as when you are presenting complex material. They may not be needed if your message is intended to inspire and motivate. In those cases the audience's full attention should be on you. Whatever your choice of visuals, don't let them upstage you. It is you, not the visuals, who need the audience's attention.

Do not darken the room. This will keep the audience from seeing you show your passion for your message. What is more you cannot see the audience in the dark and will not be able to adjust your delivery as needed.

Today's PowerPoint technology offers an opportunity to create dazzling effects but be careful not to overuse them; remember you are the star of the show. When using graphics, the simpler the better. Do not overload the slides. For each slide, use a maximum of four lines of four words each. Above all, do not use the visuals as cue cards. Speak to the audience, not the visuals.

A simple flipchart often works best. Stand to the right of the flipchart. Turn each page with your left hand and turn your attention back to the audience. Give the audience time to see what's on the page, then continue talking, pointing to each particular item with an open left hand as you discuss it.

5. Rehearse with Realism

Do not count on the power of your position to get the audience's cooperation. Even the chief executive cannot command compliance. Instead, you must persuade the audience to accept your viewpoint and, to move them to action, you must inspire them.

To inspire any group you must come across as credible, confident and likable, someone who shares the audience's values and feels their pain. The best way to do this is to put passion into your message. Show that you care deeply about what you are saying. Create some energy! The audience will share your enthusiasm because energy is contagious.

You cannot express passion if you speak from a script. Practice to the point where you can speak spontaneously. This takes serious rehearsing. Using your visuals, rehearse with a co-worker or family member who plays the role of audience and gives you feedback on how well you are coming across.

Rehearse your body movement as well as your content. If there is a lectern in the room, plan to get out from behind it because it only serves as a barrier between you and the audience. Let your whole body enliven your presentation; the larger the room, the greater the body movement that is needed. Gesture decisively but naturally to make an important point. When you are not gesturing, drop your hands at your side comfortably. Do not use the “fig leaf” or “parade rest” posture; rather, relax your open palms at your side. Take a breath after each thought to prevent yourself from racing on; speaking too quickly is one of the signs of a nervous presenter. Vary your voice level. Use dramatic pauses. Avoid saying “you know” or using non-words like “um” and “uh.”

Use your eyes as a communication tool. Do not look down at the floor or at the room’s back wall. Those are signs of an insecure speaker. Do not scan the room with your eyes. Scanning actually causes nervousness, since it creates too much information for your brain to process. Instead, look at one audience member as you say a phrase, breathe, and then look at another as you continue -- throughout your presentation. Communispond calls this technique “Eye-Brain Control”™. Using this technique does more than help you connect with the audience. It also helps you reduce any anxiety you may be feeling. Breathing naturally also helps reduce nervousness.

Looking at individual faces also will help you gauge how the audience is reacting to your talk. Are they looking really interested? Expand on that point. Do they seem puzzled? Simplify what you’re saying or use an analogy the audience can relate to. Are they looking bored? Shake things up by asking a question.

Rehearsal pays huge dividends. According to an academic study conducted at Communispond, commitment to rehearsal increased effectiveness by 42 percent. The more often you present the shorter the rehearsal time that is needed.

6. Prepare for the Q&A

With a small group, perhaps around a conference room table, it may be best to invite questions as you present, particularly if it is a planning meeting. With a larger audience, it is best to say you will answer questions at the end.

Rehearse the Q&A as well as the formal part of your presentation. You have identified the questions likely to be asked when you structured the presentation. Practice delivering succinct, compelling answers to them that provide the required information and also tie back to one of your main points. Use the last question as an opportunity to wrap up what you’ve been saying, express once more your passion for your idea and ask the audience to take action.

Bill Rosenthal is chief executive of [Communispond](#), which has helped more than 700,000 managers communicate with clarity and power. It has served more than 350 of the Fortune 500 companies since its founding 43 years ago. Go to the company’s website for free access to white papers, articles, and videos on all aspects of communications and selling, to sign up to receive free e-newsletters and to learn the schedule of upcoming open-enrollment courses.