

HOW TO GIVE A SUCCESSFUL PRESENTATION – by John R Graham

There are times when good isn't good enough--and making a presentation is one of them. In fact, it should be at the top of the list. This is one activity that isn't "just a game." When it comes to presenting, coming in second is never good enough.

For presenters, "doing your best" is irrelevant--the goal is to be the best. And it's possible, even for those who do not see themselves as presenters.

Most presentations are less than stellar performances because those responsible for them fail to recognize an essential principal: the extent to which a presentation can influence listeners.

It isn't just what we say that counts; it's very much how we communicate that makes the difference. That's what presenting is all about. Here are guidelines for making persuasive presentations, whether you are speaking to one person, a committee or a large audience.

1. Don't charge ahead--take charge. It's over in the first 60 seconds. How you are perceived and evaluated is determined in the opening seconds of your presentation. The first impression lasts. And that's the way you want it.

In the first minute, the listeners--whether one or 1,000--must have a clear, powerful and indelible impression that what you are about to say is important because it benefits them. If the opening is weak, confused or dragging, you will have made an impression that is difficult to change. In other words, a presenter must lead from the start.

2. Aim at the audience. Whether you are speaking to co-workers or making a sales presentation, the listeners are your customers. Who are they? Where are they coming from? What's bothering them? What do they want? The answers to these questions shape the tone and set the texture of your presentation. If you don't address these issues, you've lost your audience.

Have a clear understanding of how you're going to focus the presentation. Are you educating, providing new information? Do you want the listeners to reject a particular plan or program? Or do you want them to embrace one? Or both? Everything in the presentation should move toward your objective.

3. Give it a strong theme. Tie it all together in a neat package. Remember, complexity confuses, so the goal is to make your presentation clear and memorable. One seminar leader, for example, talks about the inefficiency (he calls it "stupidity") of cold calling. He wraps the session around a central theme: "Cold Calls Kill Sales." And he keeps driving home that message throughout the seminar as he introduces the participants to what he considers new, more effective ways to attract new customers.

4. Get the right focus. Most presenters fail because they are all wrapped up in what they want to say and ignore what the listeners want to hear. You've heard it a hundred times: "We're the oldest," "We're the biggest," and "We have an impressive list of Fortune 500 customers." It all sounds great--to the person

giving the presentation. But the listener says, "There's nothing in it for me." Whether it's a sales presentation or an educational seminar, it is not about you. The spotlight belongs on the listener.

5. Present the right benefits. Salespeople tend to get excited about features, even though they know it's the benefits that sell. There's a good reason why this happens: features are fun! Essentially, features are toys. "Can you believe it; this machine makes 100 copies a minute." Benefits are hard work because it means understanding the customer's requirements. Does the customer need 100 copies a minute? What is the customer looking for? You need the answers before the presentation if you are going to focus on the benefits that count for the customer.

6. Connect with the listener's head. If anyone thinks emotions don't play a powerful role in business decision-making, just consider the ill-fated dotcoms or, more appropriately, the "dotbombs." Hundreds of millions of dollars poured into these companies that never had a chance to turn a profit. Why? Because a lot of people wanted to believe that there was a pot of gold at the end of their rainbow. Driving it all was unadulterated emotion.

While there is a place for emotion, presentations must make sense to the listener. And that means using facts that connect with the audience.

7. Make the presentation exciting. Even if the information in a presentation is accurate and important, the presentation can fail for one major reason: it's dull. Remember, dull doesn't do it.

How do you see yourself when you're in front of a group? Are you a salesperson or an instructor helping listeners understand a new idea, product or service? The correct answer is neither. You are an actor with a major role to play. The presentation is your stage

Every salesperson is an actor on a stage. Every customer is an audience. And every audience expects a top performance. If the audience doesn't get what it expects, you will get an unmistakable thumbs down, not only on your presentation but also on the deal you're asking the audience to sign off on.

8. Personalize the presentation. Boilerplate works for boilers but not for presentations. Listeners know when they are getting a "one-size-fits-all" proposal, speech, seminar or training session. If it isn't customized for specific audiences, it doesn't fit.

The audience must feel that you are talking directly to them. This is accomplished by including facts, information, statistics, other data, and graphics about them, whether it is a company, an association or an industry.

9. Get the audience talking. Few presenters understand the importance of listener participation. They want to get going and get through it. Good presentations are dotted with listener interruptions.

While it is a good idea for one person to speak at a time, it should never be just one person who speaks during a presentation. The best way to get an audience on your side (and keep it there) is to get the listeners involved in the presentation. One seminar leader feels so strongly about audience involvement,

he intersperses provocative questions throughout his sessions. The participants are encouraged (disciplined) to listen because they know the "quizzes" are coming.

10. Keep it moving. It may come as something of a surprise but making a presentation is one instance where fast is better than slow. Here's why. The average person speaks about 125 words per minute. This same person thinks about three times that rate. This is why people often say, "As hard as I tried, my mind kept wandering."

Moving quickly does not create a retention problem if you combine an effective use of visuals with your presentation. If the audience can hear and see at the same time, they are more involved.

11. Hand out the hard copy. Don't allow anything to interfere with connecting with your audience. You want everyone's attention directed at you, so don't hand out the handouts before the presentation. Wait until you have finished. However, giving the listeners an outline with space for notes is one way to keep their attention focused, while making it easier for them to follow you.

12. It's a show! While there are occasions when a presenter is simply "delivering a paper," they are the exceptions. Even then, there may very well be great interest in what could be a new finding, a discovery or some long-awaited report.

Nevertheless, most presentations--including proposals--should aim at capturing the listener's imagination and attention--and this requires drama, particularly having all the conditions just right. This includes the room set-up and arrangement, the temperature of the room, the chairs, the lighting, the sound system and the A/V equipment. Will the doors bang as someone comes in? Will a phone ring--including cell phones? Distractions destroy attention--and when that happens, a presenter loses points.

In other words, the right conditions create the best show. In fact, that's the way to think about any presentation. It's a show, and like any show it must be appropriate for the audience and applause (including the acceptance of a proposal) may very well depend on the quality of the performance as well as the quality of the content.

Are presentations so crucial they demand such a thorough planning and execution? The answer is yes. More often than not, they are pivotal.

That creates immense pressure, of course. And once it is given, there's no chance to repeat it. Like any other form of art, the artist is deeply involved. Those who present know that it is not just what they say that is on the line; they are on it as well.

This is why presenting is not a matter of just doing one's best. Presenting is a matter of being the best.

John R. Graham is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. Mr. Graham writes for a variety of publications and speaks on business, marketing and sales topics for company and association meetings. He is the recipient of an APEX Grand Award in writing. He can be contacted at 40 Oval Road, Quincy, MA 02170 (617-328-0069; fax: 617-471-1504); j_graham@grahamcomm.com). The company's web site is www.grahamcomm.com.

