

The Art of Presentation



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Effective Presentation Skills – The First Ten Questions

Being asked to give a public presentation can be both gratifying and frightening. The gratification is natural since we can assume our innate talents have been noted, our expertise acknowledged and our humility respected! How rare is that? The feeling of fright is also entirely natural – caused mainly by the uncertainty and the unknown. But a fear of public speaking can be overcome. Indeed it is typically tackled by solid preparation and planning which are the essential attributes for effective presentations.

But putting aside these natural human emotions, gratification and fear, there is an immediate set of priorities that must be started. You should not accept the invitation to give a presentation immediately. Now this might seem an unrealistic expectation when faced with the fiery South West Regional VP for Distribution but if it's the conference planner from the Distribution Association then you are undoubtedly on firmer ground. They will understand. And if it is the fiery VP it's worthwhile to emphasise the professionalism with which you approach presentations at this stage.

Our move to not accept a presentation engagement immediately is not a result of coyness. No, we have to find out more. And finding out more at this stage is very important in the context of our later presentation planning and preparation. Before we accept an invitation to make a presentation we need answers to these questions:

Who wants you to speak and which organisation do they represent?

There is every chance that the person asking you to present is known to you. But equally they might have contacted you through a third party or via a contact in your LinkedIn network for example. In that case it makes sense to put the contact into context and establish who they work for, whether they are independent or who they represent.

What are their contact details?

Even if you know the person who invites you to make a presentation it's a good idea to confirm the best contact details. Check whether their cell has changed or whether email is preferred. And if the presentation organiser is not known to you then it is absolutely essential that you establish contact arrangements – which are, of course, reciprocal.

What is the planned event?

It's vital to establish what event is being planned. Is it a sales conference or an annual Association meeting? Is it a meeting of technical partners or a product launch? Knowing some simple details of the event allows us to prepare our planning. For example, if we are asked to speak at an Association's annual meeting we should

establish the Association by name and its primary function. It could be a Trade Association or a charity. Knowing these details allows us to picture our potential audience and our likely participation.

When and where is the planned event?

Distance is not dead. Knowing when and where the event is due to occur must be identified right away. If the event is local that might make it easier to participate. Alternatively if the event involves significant travel it might be possible to combine your participation with some other activity. Some knowledge of when the event is planned for will also provide some clues. If the event is next week then you can be assured that more than one speaker has dropped out and you are being asked out of necessity. It does happen, unfortunately. Typically presentation planners work to timescales of several months when planning key events.

How many speakers will be involved?

It's a rarity for any speaker to be the sole presenter on the podium. In most instances you will share the platform with several speakers with a budgeted time allowance of some 45 minutes. Perhaps longer. Knowing how many speakers are involved gives you an indication of the event's importance, its profile within its industry and its potential attendance. And as a tip, once we have established how many speakers are involved we have the means to explore their details in more detail at a later time.

What is the theme of the event?

It's not unusual for event planners to use a theme with which to identify their event. Using a theme such as, “**Being Best**”, allows a range of speakers to explore all the essential attributes of customer care, quality management, production quality or people management. It provides a framework for each speaker and importantly, allows each speaker to interact sub-consciously with the rest of the platform. Knowing the theme at this stage is essential for your preparation. And if there is no clear theme you should aim to get this on the presentation planner's agenda later.

What sort of presentation is expected from me?

This might be a purely mechanical question, but it has to be asked. For instance there might be an expectation that you will make a presentation and then answer questions later. Or, you might be expected to sit on a speaker panel, make a presentation in turn and then have questions asked collectively of the panel later. Different formats require different preparation and you should understand the event requirements early on.

Why am I being asked to present?

We should take care with this question. If the event is planned for next week you might already suspect the answer! But there is a serious point to be made. If you are being asked to present because you are a respected expert in your field then it's very likely that your presentation subject is going to be crafted along the same lines. Alternatively, if you are asked to present because of your work in a particular organisation then it's natural to consider citing relevant organisation case studies and references when you move on with presentation planning.

What visual elements can be supported and will the event be broadcast?

We take it for granted that every event supports multimedia content. But if we are asked to speak before or after lunch then the visual dimension of our talk will be very different to a standard podium presentation. This point must be picked up later with the event planner.

It's not unusual for the media to be involved with larger scale events. Knowledge about media involvement at this stage is important since a late surprise might prove a problem. If the media is to be involved then you should ensure that your marketing or PR team is aware of their involvement which could be mutually productive.

Can I call you back to confirm?

This is not as hard as it sounds. You will need to check your schedule. Or you might need to check with your partner. Alternatively you might want to see whether anything else in the schedule is moveable to accommodate this event. On the basis of the answers that you have already received this invitation might be a case of..."drop everything and attend," or an instance of..."try to squeeze it in if possible." Once you have agreed a timeline in which to call back the planner you must call them back. It's both polite and politic. You will need their active support and involvement later.

So we have ten easy questions to ask before we agree to give that presentation. In essence they are the first steps needed for effective presentations. By asking them we acquire much of the useful information that will subsequently guide our presentation planning process. And by planning effectively we ensure that we present effectively without the collateral fear of public speaking. Now, should we accept that invitation or not?

Effective Presentations – The First Step

How familiar is this scenario? Do you typically click on the PowerPoint icon immediately you are tasked with preparing a presentation? If that is the case then you definitely have common cause with most of us. And regrettably it is a big mistake. It's a mistake because our presentation focus is already upon the mechanics of slides, decks, visuals, clip-art, logos and templates. Such a focus will be needed – but much later. For now the focus has to be on our expected achievement and outcome.

Before we click on the PowerPoint icon we should draft in a single sentence the planned achievement of our presentation. In today's business language we would recognise this as a mission statement. But unlike many vacuous mission statements the purpose of this one is to capture the planned impact of our presentation upon our audience. That is, how do we plan for our audience to respond? We should consider the following questions at this stage:

After my presentation what will the audience do that is different?

After the presentation what will they know that is different?

Once they have heard the presentation what will they believe that is different?

Before we begin to physically lay the foundations of an effective presentation, let alone build its structure or prepare the PowerPoint slides we must have a firm grasp on the expected outcome of the presentation – what it is that we are aiming to do. To be effective our presentation will have an impact upon our audience beyond that of a management report, an email or a document. Our direct face-to-face presentation aims to change the actual behaviour, thoughts and beliefs of an audience. That is why we do it.

If our successful presentation has to impact our audience in a way that simply reading its content would not achieve then our mission statement has to capture these planned expectations. So, taking an example from a recent manufacturing presentation in the South West, our mission statement was:

"To ensure that the team understands the HR (Human Relations) impact of factory closure."

What can we say about this? It meets the requirement for a single sentence. It is succinct and to the point. It is measurable -- we should be able to gauge the team's understanding of the HR consequences quite readily. It also sounds achievable within the context of a single presentation. And that should not be overlooked. We can not expect too much from only one presentation!

With the mission statement prepared, what is next? Well, my advice would be to park the mission statement for an hour. Then try to recall it from memory. If you can do so readily then you have got something that is fully workable and from which we can hang the working objectives of a quality and effective presentation. And that is the second step.

Effective Presentations – The Second Step for Success

Building strong workable objectives is the second step in effective presentation planning. The emphasis is definitely on the word, workable. All our objectives have to be achievable by us, the speaker. And they have to be achieved in the time permitted with the audience's involvement. Once we factor in the external pressures of time and audience it is imperative that we have the means to deliver – workable objectives give us the means.

Having good workable objectives is, therefore, an essential element of the effective presentation. Critically they fulfill 3 main purposes:

Workable objectives provide us with a framework for success – giving us a quick embodiment of everything that we need to present.

Workable objectives stop us from rambling and going off message – either when we plan, when we write or when we deliver our presentation.

Workable objectives get us to where we want to be getting – serving as visible milestones of progress made and distance still to be covered.

But that is not all they do. Workable objectives have another overriding purpose in our presentation. Well outlined and understood objectives assist our audience to understand our presentation's logic flow. They ensure that our audience is more likely to follow the presentation and remain captivated by the subject – whatever that subject might be. And that has to be the overriding reason why we invest time and effort in getting the right objectives.

In an earlier article we used a mission statement selected from a presentation given in the South West: *"To ensure that the team understands the HR (Human Resources) consequences of factory closure"*. It was a dry old subject, but typical of many presentation missions made every day in the work-place. With this mission statement we could expect some workable objectives along the lines of:

Set the scene for manufacturing optimisation.

Establish the productivity benchmarks for manufacturing progress.

Assess the options available and their impacts.

Describe and cost the HR (Human Resources) consequences.

Detail the preferred route for factory closure.

Our target should be some four or five workable objectives that can be handled easily and smoothly in a business presentation. Any more objectives than this, however, and you run the risk of exhausting your audience. It is a mistake that is most often found with the PowerPoint presentation style – where we are presented with multiple lists of objectives and issues at every stage. Too much detail at this early stage is not useful.

Our workable objectives should be short and sharp. And to the point.

They should stress action and focus on activity. Your choice of words is important, for they also convey important meaning for the audience. For the matter of the cardboard manufacturing plant we used the action words: set the scene, establish, assess, describe and detail. And they were probably appropriate for the circumstances. In a marketing presentation your workable objectives might include: research, develop, deliver, compete or gain share – action words which are well understood by the audience work the best. There is no room for misunderstanding.

Finally, once you have committed to your workable objectives, consider how they fit with your mission statement. Ensure that the two are in tandem and assist one another, bearing in mind how they impact upon an audience's understanding and appreciation of our presentation. With the workable objectives settled, the next step is the planning of our presentation in more detail.

Presentation Planning – Know Your Audience

There is a saying that the effective presentation is the relevant presentation. And it is equally true that the effective presenter is the one who provides relevance to their audience. In both instances we note that relevance is the biggest determinant when we come to judge the effectiveness of any presentation. But what is relevance if it is so important? Well, for starters it is incredibly simple for something that is so important. To be relevant, in the minds of our audience, our presentation has to associate its title, subject matter, content and findings with the immediate cares and interests of the audience. I did say that it was simple.

But for something that is so simple it is often overlooked. If we think of the presentation from the mindset of the audience; the value that the audience extracts from their participation has to outweigh the costs that they incur in their attendance – time, travel and reputation costs. None of these costs can be overlooked – particularly that of time which surely has the largest value.

If the audience judges that their time is better spent doing something else or listening to someone else then we have hardly been effective. Knowing the costs incurred in participation, therefore, our task is to make the presentation as relevant and topical as it can possibly be – looking to outweigh the costs of audience participation with our added value. That is the immediate hurdle.

Knowing our audience better is the first step in achieving relevance and getting to an effective presentation. And like most marketing activities there are some useful techniques to help us know our audience or market better. These techniques give us the means to segment our audience, to profile their likely drivers and gauge their responsiveness to our presentation. There are several methods that we adopt to help us get started:

We can **refer to former participants** at an event. First of all we should speak to colleagues and acquaintances about the event in which we plan to speak. We can easily establish who attended the event the previous year and their rationale for being there. They could also clarify what benefit they expected to derive from their presence and the success of the outcome.

We can **refer to the event organisers**. The organisers will give us access to a participant list -- perhaps last year's list and a summary of delegates for the planned event. The listing will provide details on the participants by name, job title, organisation and industry sector at the bare minimum. It might go further with geographic base details for instance. With these records we can establish a picture of the "typical" participant and gain some insight into their likely requirements. You should note here that for many organisations the event organiser is likely to be an

internal team member and, very often, is either the Executive Assistant of the VP or Director – discretion is needed!

We can always **contact other speakers**. Organisers will put us in touch with other speakers for earlier events in addition to the planned event. If there is any difficulty with earlier events, note that where the previous year's event was publicized on the web there will inevitably be a string of contact details still available. Other speakers will give us further insight into audience characteristics, their likes and dislikes. They can also tell us what worked and what did not in their presentations – how effective were they?

Knowing how our audience is selected for an event can also be telling, not least because their selection impacts how we know and understand them and how we prepare material that is relevant. Typically our audience can be selected in one of 3 ways:

Self-selection – where the audience has actively chosen to participate in a conference, discussion forum or association meeting. This audience will give us the most information about their likely needs. But they are also likely to be the most demanding.

Selected – where the audience has been co-opted to attend a meeting in-house or off-site. In all likelihood this will be an organisation briefing, a sales conference or some kind of distributor event. This audience is likely to be the most homogeneous and there will be plenty of information about them. If not demanding, they will certainly demand relevance to keep their attention.

Passing traffic – where the audience attends an event spontaneously or without any prior arrangement. We come across these passing traffic audiences at trade shows, exhibitions and expositions where the organisers offer seminar opportunities that are available to all show attendees. If we plan to give such a seminar we will have little prior knowledge of who will join us on the stand or in the seminar room – but analysing the previous year's list of attendees is essential.

By analysing audience data we can establish the framework for strong and relevant presentation content. We should now have a good idea of the particular interests of our audience, their requisite needs, their dislikes, and their primary drivers. With this information we can incorporate topical elements into the presentation's content. We can introduce industry sector news and key issues into the subject matter.

We can make reference to key figures in certain organisations or industries – we can demonstrate that we have a rapport with the people and concerns that fill our audience's working days. In demonstrating relevance we also demonstrate effectiveness. We still have some way to go, not least we have to ensure that our presentation is useful and meets our mission requirements, but we have achieved relevance by knowing our audience. We are well down the path to being an effective presenter.

Effective Presentation Skills – 3 Tips to Engage Our Audience

The process of engaging our audience goes beyond the simple act of speaking in public. Many public speakers fail to engage their audiences with their enthusiasm or knowledge of their subject – just being on the podium does not guarantee that we will make the all-important audience engagement. But, with an understanding of some techniques and a feeling for the dynamics of an audience we can become much more effective. In common with all effective presentation skills, there are organising tools and techniques that we can apply to great effect. Mastering these techniques is crucial to forming the vital link with our audiences. Here are three main pointers to becoming more effective when we reach the podium.

Appear knowledgeable. There is a natural play-off between our presentation skill and subject expertise. When an audience knows we are expert in our field they do not expect our presentation skills to be so casually slick. In essence they are less demanding. Note, of course, that the reverse also applies – if we are not knowledgeable then we had better be slick! Being an expert presenter allows us to radiate passion and interest in a subject, enthusing an audience. It is true that no one can possibly be an expert in everything but most of us can expect to be expert in something – the sweet spot of presenting success. With the combination of an appropriate subject, our own knowledge and expertise we become unbeatable.

Use a presentation theme. Our audience will adopt a theme in the same way that they adopt a slogan or a logo; because it is simple and memorable. A consistent theme to our presentation, conveying practical benefit and familiarity will be remembered best – proving most effective for helping our audience to follow the presentation. Themes are essentially memory aids. They provide presentation continuity. When we develop a theme it is best to consider the main issues that preoccupy our audience and hook into these. In a competitive industry with low barriers to entry we might try themes along the lines of... “*Compete to Win*” or, “*Perfection is Completion*” or “*Being First*”. These are suggestive of competitive survival. They imply benefit and are short enough for memory retention. Take some time when considering a theme and it will really pay off.

Present the right points. We should expect our audience to retain no more than 10% of our presentation. If we present too much then it will either be forgotten or not absorbed at all. Typically we should aim to present some 3 to 4 main points during a 30 minute presentation. Yes, there might be room for sub-points but the focus has to be on the 3 to 4 main points. When working out our main points we should also note that our audience is thinking ahead at a rate of 600 or so words a minute and we will be speaking at a rate of around 150 words a minute. Such a speed difference has huge potential for the audience to disengage and wander off at a tangent – probably jumping ahead of us dramatically in the process. Too many points will simply make this worse.

If we add linguistic interpretation into this potent mix then we have even more room for uncertainty. The main points in our presentation should be:

Unambiguous. They must be certain and clear.

Self-standing. They must be capable of standing alone without the support of others. If we have points that merge into one another then they are not strong enough. We should edit these.

The task of engaging our audience can be easily and readily undertaken. With expertise, area knowledge and advocacy we can engage an audience and keep their attention. All audiences respect expertise even where it is in areas of arcane detail. Everything has its importance somewhere. It just goes to emphasize that prior to reaching the presentation podium we are fully prepared and well-versed in the detail of our subject.

It makes sense to use organising techniques – a presentation theme and 3 to 4 main points to assist absorption and memory retention by the audience. Our audience needs solidity and substance with which to engage. Thinking ahead at the rate of 600 words a minute our audience benefits from a clear and relevant presentation theme providing the means to place our main points into a mental framework of their own making. These points, strongly and purposefully made, will keep our audience on track, engaged. These organising techniques can be boosted by other procedural devices for audience engagement – but more about these later.

How to Engage Our Audience – The Top 10 Techniques

When it comes to organising our presentations there really is a lot more to the planning process than the PowerPoint palette. On its own a PowerPoint slide deck will not organise your talk for maximum audience engagement. It will not, on its own, enable an audience to follow the flow and momentum of a presentation. Instead we can rely on a set of well-used presentation techniques for keeping our audience engaged. Here are the top 10 techniques that we have available:

Tell them technique. Many presenters rate the effectiveness of the Tell them technique. It has 3 main components. The first stage involves us telling our audience what we are about to tell them, the second phase has us telling the audience and the third and final stage involves us telling the audience what we have just told them. Simple indeed. Effectively it's a repetition technique and something that has echoes in many other rhetorical devices.

Stepping stone or way marker technique. Once we have prepared the working objectives for our presentation it should be very easy to use this technique. It involves us plotting stepping stones or markers that readily identify where we are in a presentation. Our main presentation points are plotted at the beginning and the end of our presentation structure. Our two lesser points are then plotted between them – effectively bridging the two main points. By following the logical steps we reach the conclusion.

Acrostic technique. This sounds painful but is in fact very easy to prepare. It is a technique, used by many speakers, that dates back millennia – certainly to the ancient Greeks. Using what is essentially a word puzzle the speaker employs a technique for spelling out the theme of a presentation plus its major defining points. Using either the first, middle, last or consecutive letters of a word in a line allows the speaker to spell out a major theme. Here is an example from a quality management presentation:

Ethos

E -- Excellence

Th -- Thoroughness

O -- Openness

S -- Success

It is a very powerful technique that has great value for subsequent audience recall.

Anecdote and story technique. Who can deny the power of New Testament parables or the fables of Aesop. Stories have been used throughout history to commend a course of action or explanation. And today is no different. Yes, they are most appropriate for presentations with a moral foundation but they are equally at home in presentations dedicated to customer service, loyalty and team work. The short management text, "Gung Ho!", by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles is a collection of such stories.

Problem, cause, solution technique. This technique could be paraphrased as the what, so what, now what technique. It enables the speaker to map out a problem that is well known to the audience, detail its causes and then expound on a solution. Exploring the underlying causes of a problem gives room for sub-points. A variant might include a set of competing solutions to the problem, an appraisal of their relative strengths and a conclusion with a best-fit proposal.

Analogy technique. With an analogy we use something that is familiar to our audience to either drape over the unfamiliar or support the evidence of the unfamiliar. For an audience of telecoms executives one might reference the business of customer service to that of a mobile handset. Where we have signal strength we need trained staff; where we have a lithium polymer battery we need motivated people and where we have clear screen technology we need staff incentives...and so on. The analogy gives us the opportunity to paint a well known familiar picture to which we hook some less known points. We leave it to our audience to make the obvious associations.

Logical technique – dilemma. Logical structures are the rhetorical devices of old. Long taught and much admired, there is a tendency to overlook them because of their familiarity – not least because of their use in courtroom drama. With the dilemma technique we supply logical, reasoned proof that an alternative viewpoint or proposition is invalid. Today it might be labeled evidence-based policy/ practice.

Logical technique – deductive logic. Here we make two proposals or statements; one is primary and the other is secondary. Each statement has a common element. We then make a third statement that can be logically implied by the other two statements. Here is an example:

“All managers have hidden talents”

“You are a manager”

“Therefore you have hidden talents”

It is a powerful device that is easily followed by an audience.

Logical technique – inductive logic. With this technique we can arrive at a generalization – a broad conclusion. Less finite than deductive logic, it allows us to make a series of observations with shared circumstances, and then propose a conclusion. Here is an example:

“This manager can present well”

“Steve, the HR manager, is a good presenter”

“My manager, John, is a good presenter”

“All our managers are good presenters”

The inductive reasoning technique is inherently less robust than deductive reasoning and is best used when we have shared circumstances or employment with our audience – the same enterprise, division or team.

Logical technique – analogy. We use this technique when we cite an example or case study with seemingly identical characteristics to the subject matter. We make the suggestion that if the case study has the same characteristics then it is logical to suggest that it shares identical causes or fundamentals with the main subject; identical characteristics equate to identical beginnings. It is a well used approach that works well – but do take care when selecting the analogy.

These top ten techniques are invaluable aids for organising more effective presentations. They are well used but not outdated. They can support contemporary events and circumstances. They are useful regardless of the scale of the speaking event. And, importantly, they are equally valid for the range of speaking opportunities we face – board room, conferences, seminars or hospitality events. In short they are essential tools for effective speakers.

PowerPoint – 10 Top Tips for Presenters

Could our current fixation with the PowerPoint presentation inspire a future generation to critically analyse this turn of the century social convention? Will our focus on this presentation style be worthy of social commentary? In much the same way that today's graduates smirk at how we used to send memos in the internal post will our business successors marvel at the convention that is PowerPoint?

If the answer is, "no", then I hope it is because the convention is short-lived; that somehow we ditch the idea that because we can create some text rich slides on our notebook we can, therefore, present at will. The one does not follow the other. There is a lot more to giving an effective presentation based on PowerPoint slides than just creating the slides themselves. There are 10 main tips that we can follow:

Don't forget the basics. As a speaker our role is to entertain, motivate, inspire, persuade, cajole or inform an audience. No matter the sophistication of the software we have at our finger tips the prime role we play is no different. If the software gets in the way of our main role we should not use it. All the speaker techniques and effects remain totally applicable when PowerPoint is used.

Go light on the bullet points. PowerPoint defaults can push us into one of a number of presentation slide formats (text and content layouts) that feature bullet lists. If we use them we should be careful. Bullet lists should summarize – in one, two or three words per bullet – each of the points we want to make. When we fill each bullet point with words we run the risk of exhausting our audience. The lists themselves should also be kept brief. A few bullets only. Not a whole slide full of them.

Go easy on the data. Yes, we have to show how we reach a conclusion or a recommendation – but we do not need to show all the data available to us. A deluge of data projected on to the back wall of the meeting room is just not going to be read. Our audience wants to scan for trends. They will seek anomalies and they want to know causes. Our audience is not in a position to digest huge chunks of data and we should respect that.

Use only one word where two might do. Editing our material is a necessity. We have to keep our material succinct, readable and indicative of our main points so our audience can take it all in. PowerPoint lends itself to superb graphics, image display and video. These are the most powerful parts of the package and we should aim to use them more as speaker supports. Whatever we do, however, we should not be tempted to use the copy/ paste function to introduce chunks of text from another document into the PowerPoint presentation slide format. It won't work.

Don't read the slides. PowerPoint tends to encourage us to read from our own slides - from either the notebook screen display or the larger projection screen. Both are inappropriate. They indicate that we are using the slides as a crutch. Reading from the screen also ensures that we don't have eye contact with the audience and run the risk of blocking the audience's view. But worst of all, reading our slides suggests that we do not know our own material, we are unsure of its content and we have not rehearsed. Audiences respect expertise and authority in their presenters – reading our slides suggests neither.

Reference the points on the slides. Clearly we use PowerPoint slides for a purpose; either to summarize our main points or to illustrate them. Given the purpose, therefore, it's incumbent on us to actually reference these points once they are illustrated. Try to pause. Indicate the point, look back to the audience and make the reference. Doing this joins up our talk with our slide show – helping our audience to digest the main points.

Use the slide build technique. This is a PowerPoint jewel that is under used. It deserves more attention not least because it lends itself to an interactive approach in our presentation. Using slide build techniques we can reference a point on the display screen, we can ask an open question of the audience and then we can all witness an answer appear on the screen. This could be a word build or a graph display. The options are practically limitless. All the settings are accessed via the Slide Show, Animation Scheme settings in PowerPoint. Again, the cautionary note, we shouldn't allow the technology to take over – but there's great opportunity here.

Use the black slide technique. We often need to take stock during a presentation – to confirm where we are or the direction in which we are headed. At this moment we need our audience's total focus on us the speaker. We don't want a distracting slide on the display screen. It's tempting to project a corporate logo or a title slide. These are OK but can still be a distraction. Instead we should use a black slide (Format, Background, Colors, Apply to Selected). The black slide gives the impression that we have switched off the projector or the notebook. Naturally our audience switches their attention to us. Once our point is made we can continue with our slides. The technique also works at the close of a presentation.

Use fonts and font sizes carefully. PowerPoint will always default to a selected font and font size when we prepare a slide presentation. Our task is to either stick with the default arrangement or use a better option for the job. When we use alternative fonts and font sizes our drivers should be: readability and consistency. Some fonts are made for reading at a distance – others are not. Fonts can signal structure changes such as titles, sub-titles and content. But when applied indiscriminately they don't signal anything other than a mess. Over capitalization is also a major blow to legibility. It appears that the human race is not designed to read in CAPITAL LETTERS – the upper case, lower case approach is best. PowerPoint will advise us when we are being a little too extreme in our selections – but many of us have already turned off the Office Assistant!

Take it steady with the imagery. Slide colour schemes can actively hinder the readability of our PowerPoint slides. Reading red or green text at a distance is tough. Plan to use dark text colours (black or blue) out of a white background if you can. Or, where corporate colour schemes are used with a template format we aim for crisp white lettering out of a dark background. We noted earlier that PowerPoint is superb at incorporating high quality visuals (not necessarily Clip Art!) into our presentations. These should be used wherever possible. But take the cautionary point not to overdo the whiz bang effects in the slide show menus (Slide Show, Slide Transition and Slide Show, Animation Schemes).

Any slide presentation can distract an audience from their speaker. But by sticking to the basic principles of giving a presentation and noting both the advantages and disadvantages of PowerPoint we can use this package to its full effect. Our slides are not a crutch – we should still prepare fully. Our slides are not designed to be read by us, the speaker – we should still rehearse. And our slides should be consistent with our primary purpose of entertaining, motivating, inspiring, persuading, cajoling or informing. If we note these principles our audiences will not smile at our PowerPoint convention. But they will respect our expertise and authority as presenters.

Point, Turn & Talk – Essential PowerPoint Presentation Technique for Business

Typified by the ever present PowerPoint slide deck the modern business presentation can be an exhausting affair for both speaker and audience. Barraged by information overload an exhausted audience is in no position to listen, participate in or understand our presentation.

But without labouring either the problems of PowerPoint or its many advantages there are some essential techniques with which we can improve our own performance. Our control over the images and text projected on to the screen give us a mastery that is too often overlooked.

You should recognize the following scenario. Our speaker starts their talk, looks down at their notebook, looks across to the screen seeking inspiration and then, fleetingly, looks at the audience. In looking at the screen the speaker has made no reference to its content. And the speaker has missed two opportunities.

By not referencing the content on the projection screen our speaker missed an opportunity to demonstrate subject knowledge and expertise. And our speaker missed the opportunity to ensure that the audience was listening, participating and understanding. The scenario is not uncommon. It is repeated every day coast to coast. And it makes one question whether there is in fact a link between the presenter's words and their slide deck. Well there is a link and it is of vital importance.

But the link is often lost with busy and complex slides that neither reinforce nor support the speaker's words. And it is essential that they do either one or both functions. A slide deck that performs neither is wasted work. A better plan might include:

Build less busy slides with less text and fewer bullet points.

Make one main point for each slide.

Use the picture and graphing components in PowerPoint to greater effect.

Use the build function within the PowerPoint package.

Learn the material and practice.

Develop a familiarity with the subject.

But the plan is incomplete without some technique that can also be used. It's a technique that should be familiar to most of us from our school days – though it was a case of chalk and blackboard in my days – and is easily learned.

The technique is used to reference the contents of the slide deck projected onto the screen. The justification for its use is simple. Surely, if the slide content merits display then it also merits both reference and explanation. And explanation is essential as we look for the slide content to support and reinforce our own words.

The technique involves:

Speak.

Pause.

Point at the content – using a pointer.

Turn to look at the audience.

Talk – and explain.

This overlooked technique – *point, turn & talk* – gives us the opportunity to reinforce eye contact with the audience. As we establish eye contact with the audience we project our knowledge of the subject, we build participation and, importantly, we develop understanding. Understanding is greatly improved since eye contact allows us to gauge the clarity of our words and be alert to puzzled expressions in the audience. Coupled with clearer and less busy slide content this effective technique is invaluable for the typical business PowerPoint presentation.

PresentPerfect is the effective presentation skills training course offered by Time to Market – the UK-based training resource.

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