

Be a great presenter



► Recall some of the best presenters you have seen. **Phil Gott** asks: What did they do that made them so memorable?

When I ask professional people that question, their answers are highly consistent. They almost always include the words: confident, engaging, passionate, conversational rather than scripted, natural, animated, using examples, not over-reliant on PowerPoint.

When I ask if they would like to be able to present in that style their answers are again consistent: 'Yes they would!' But I can tell from the expressions and sighs that most people assume it is beyond them.

In fact, the style they are describing – which today is what most audiences regard as good presenting – is a lot easier to achieve than most people realise. Indeed in my presentation skills training I show professionals exactly how to do it and their transformation, within just a few hours, is quite remarkable.

What really stops people from presenting in this style is not lack of ability but a misguided and ingrained culture across the professions of bad presentations (PowerPoint-dominated, content-stodgy, overly-scripted, and brain-numbingly boring!). And the worst thing is... the presenters themselves know it!

So my mission is to empower you to become the great presenter you are capable of by following a few simple guidelines. Perhaps your firm should adopt this as a credo, giving everyone in the firm permission to deliver great presentations, instead of imposing constraints that reinforce poor presenting.

1 Aim for excellence

You aim for excellence in your client work and you should aim to achieve the same high standards in your presentational style. Anything less would be to settle for mediocrity and you should not do that. You cannot expect to be naturally excellent without training and practice (there is no such thing as a 'born presenter') so be willing to learn.

2 Stick to what you know

Audiences expect you to have a good knowledge of your subject (although they do not expect you to know everything about your subject because no-one ever does). So seek out opportunities to speak about topics on which you can draw from a reservoir or knowledge and experience. That is the best way to present confidently.

What if you are asked to speak about something that is not really your subject?

You have three choices:

- 1 Insist on the preparation time necessary

to get yourself fully up to speed.

Warning: this can be time-consuming!

- 2 Narrow-down the subject to something that you can speak confidently about. If you are asked to speak about the legal implications of e-commerce, what you would actually speak about is how one of your clients has dealt with the move on-line (which in all likelihood is going to be more interesting anyway).
- 3 Politely decline (to avoid damaging your reputation and probably your firm's too).

3 Connect with your audience and avoid the 'knowledge dump'

Presentations can be an excellent medium for engaging, inspiring, motivating and even informing an audience. But they are a terrible medium for conveying lots of detailed information. Your audience will not remember it but they will remember you – as boring!

Your clients are not interested in the law or the latest accounting standard. They are interested in themselves and they will only be interested in you and what you have to say if you can help them. So show them how they can save money, find new opportunities, avoid risks, protect their reputation, save time, etc.

To make your talk interesting, focus on what your audience can take away from it.

Instead of a talk about 'the law related to e-commerce' you could change it around to 'five legal ways to make money through e-commerce'. If you were speaking to an internal audience that would become: 'Five legal ways your clients can make money through e-commerce'.

4 Do not stick to the facts

Many professionals assume that their presentations should be laden with lots of weighty factual information. Surely isn't that what audiences want? Well the truth is that what audiences really follow and remember are stories. And you have lots of them; all those clients you have helped and all those poor souls you could have helped if only they had sought out your advice.

Great speakers usually spend the majority of their presentation time telling interesting stories. I choose the word 'story' rather than 'example' because stories have three elements that make them memorable: some characters, a plot and an outcome.

So aim to convey just a few key points, illustrate those points with stories, and then summarise your key points at the end.

5 Be chatty rather than formal

Today's audiences do not want to hear a speech. They don't even want to see a presentation. What they really appreciate is a speaker who adopts a chatty, engaging, conversational style.

So do not worry about getting your talk word perfect. The only way to do that would be to learn it off by heart, like an actor learning a script, and realistically you do not have time for that. Do not even prepare a script. It won't help you. If you prepare a script you will then be trying to remember what you were supposed to



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say, which puts an enormous and unnecessary pressure on any speaker. The audience does not know what you are supposed to say so don't worry about the detail.

Instead have some bullet-point notes to provide a structure, and adopt a conversational style; chatty, informal and down-to-earth. You can even phrase your bullet points as questions which you ask yourself: 'So what are the main risks with e-commerce?' Then just answer your own questions! This is a really easy and quick way to prepare and deliver a great presentation.

6 Be enthusiastic

If you are not enthusiastic about your subject you cannot hope to interest your audience in it. You should project the same level of enthusiasm you would when talking to a group of friends about a subject you are passionate about, using gestures, facial expressions and your voice to convey enthusiasm.

If you feel it would appear false to be enthusiastic about what even you regard as a dry subject, go back and consider whether you have really looked at it from the point of view of your audience. What

do they care about? Talk passionately about that.

7 Stand up and don't hide

Too often for internal presentations (the lunch-time knowledge-share) presenters sit down when they should stand up. Here is a rule-of-thumb: Fewer than 6, sit down; 6 to 12, use your judgement; more than 12, stand up. It is much easier to hold an audience's attention, to make eye contact and to convey enthusiasm when you stand.

For the same reason speakers feel more comfortable sitting, many also seek out the safety of a lectern. But those great presenters you recall were not hiding behind lecterns and nor should you. It is fine to have a few bullet-point notes as prompts, but type them in jumbo font and put them on a table.

8 Use PowerPoint slides and handouts intelligently

PowerPoint can be helpful, but used in the wrong way it is a killer. Use slides to help you achieve your objectives, rather than because you think it is expected. Avoid falling into the trap of simply narrating a dull slide show, which is what most speakers do.

Good presenters use fewer slides. Try three or four rather than 20. You can use black slides between them to get the audience's attention back and to place PowerPoint firmly in a support role, which is where it belongs.

Many presenters default to bullet point-slides, and overload them with too much information, in the vain hope that they will double-up as a handout. They end up serving neither purpose well because they cannot possibly do so. Think about what would be really useful as a takeaway refer-

A credo for your firm?

What this firm expects of its presenters

What our presenters can expect from this firm

1 We expect you to strive to deliver excellent presentations, not settle for the dreary mediocrity that is acceptable in some firms.

We will help you by providing training, opportunities to practise and honest feedback to help you excel.

2 We expect you to be an evangelist on your subjects and also to know when to leave it to someone better placed.

We will give you ample time to prepare and we will not ask you to speak in public on topics on which you would be winging-it.

We will not set you up as a target for more senior people to throw curved-ball questions which they wrongly think will impress others.

3 We expect you to deliver useful information that is directly relevant to your audience.

We will be intolerant of presenters who simply regurgitate factual information without focusing on how it relates to the audience.

4 We expect you to give lots of examples to convey your points and to tell them as engaging stories.

We will pool good examples across the firm so that you and others can draw from them.

5 We expect you to make your talks interesting and to keep the style chatty rather than formal.

We will not ask you to deliver speeches or lectures because we recognise that is not what audiences want. We will not ask you to prepare a script because we know they are inappropriate.

6 We expect you to be enthusiastic about your subjects and to convey that enthusiasm to your audience.

We will not be impressed if you appear in public to be disinterested about subjects you have chosen to specialise in and make your living from.

7 For presentations (rather than small meetings) we expect you to stand up and command attention, not cower behind an unnecessary lectern.

We will banish the lectern or at least place a warning label on it saying 'for use by inexperienced speakers only'.

8 We expect you to use PowerPoint creatively, with visual images not mere words. We do not expect, and will no longer tolerate, death by PowerPoint.

We expect you to design a handout that is fit for purpose.

We will change our brand style guide to avoid wrongly encouraging conformance with an outdated way of using PowerPoint.

We will have rooms set up to facilitate good presenting, not allowing the projection screen to dominate.

We will make assistance available to help you create compelling slides and handouts using photographs, diagrams and other truly visual aids.

9 We expect you to have something to say, and to be willing to step outside your comfort zone to say it.

We will reward people who step up, rather than those who play safe and hide.

10 We expect you to respect our time, which is precious. So get your message across as succinctly as possible and let us get back to our work.

We will not ask you to fill an hour, nor rarely even half-an-hour. Take the time you need, but no more.

ence document. The familiar format with slides down the left and space for notes on the right has become a cliché that should be banished.

9 Be nervous, but in a positive way

Even the best speakers get nervous before important presentations. It is perfectly normal. So stop worrying about whether you will feel nervous (you will) and learn how to deal with it. The key is not to hide nor control it, but to convert that negative, uneasy, nervous fear into enthusiasm; a much more positive form of nervous energy. That's what great speakers do and it is what you need to do too.

10 Keep it short

It used to be possible to hold people's attention for 40 minutes. Now even 30 would be pushing it. A good guide lies in the 18 minute limit imposed by www.TED.org (a great place to see some excellent presentations in the style I am suggesting here).

Every professional has within them the potential to be a great presenter. You owe it to yourself, your clients and your firm to strive for excellence in this important skill just as you do in the rest of your work.

For too long firms have not only tolerated but encouraged a style of presenting that everyone knows is mediocre at best. It is time to change.

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