

EFFECTIVE BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS

Last fall I went to a half day business conference where attendees signed up for two one-hour presentations on their choice of various topics offered. In the past I have been somewhat disappointed by similar seminars; however, this time both sessions “exceeded” my expectations.

The first session was a disaster! It was like attending a long sermon about a dry topic being delivered by a person you thought was speaking a foreign language. Ten minutes into the presentation most attendees had tuned out the speaker and I observed several surfing on their smart phones.

The second session was excellent even though I expected that the topic I selected would be boring. The speaker was good, his few but well-chosen PowerPoint slides were entertaining, and I can still remember a few of his points that I someday may use.

So what were the big differences in these two presentations and what are the required elements for making an effective business presentation?

First, know your audience. This may surprise you but as soon as you have a basic outline of what you’re going to talk about, set it aside for a moment. The most important step in preparing your presentation is analyzing the needs of the audience. An otherwise perfect presentation that misses the audience’s needs is a flop. Here are some thoughts to consider:

- Why will the audience be there, and what do they expect?
- What is their knowledge level about my topic?
- What will motivate them to buy into my idea, product, or service?

Organize yourself and your material. One simple method that’s been around for years is to use 3” by 5” note cards. As you research your topic simply write down ideas, quotations, websites, or other notes; just one per card. Then sort the cards in whatever order has a good flow of thoughts. This step may take quite a bit of effort. It’s likely that you will, for example, pull some cards out; move cards around within the deck; or insert a new card saying “this aspect needs more research” or a similar comment. When you decide on an order, number the cards in pencil. This is because you may later change the order, remove or add cards, or otherwise change the content.

Now it’s time to rehearse. Your objective is to become fluid and not overly-dependent on your note cards. If you find yourself flipping through them while you speak consider putting key words on regular size paper. It may be helpful to have a friend or colleague video a few minutes of your practice session, and then critique it with you. Don’t just focus on what you say; note your tone of voice, posture, eye contact, gestures, and use of visuals.

If you are informing or persuading, try to stick with three or four main ideas. Set them out with appropriate discussion, facts, and examples. Be sure to review them in your summary and conclusion. If you're asking for your audience to take a particular action, be crystal clear about what you want them to do, and also exactly how to do it.

As you prepare, be aware that your attire, appearance and demeanor can greatly enhance---or weaken---your presentation.

Use visual aids effectively. These can significantly increase the impact and retention of your presentation. For a small group meeting, a flip chart or white board might be appropriate. But for anything bigger, Microsoft PowerPoint is the gold standard. It's fairly easy to learn enough basic skills to create and use an effective PowerPoint visual slideshow.

Having good PowerPoint skills may open up a whole new set of opportunities for your presentation. For example, your notes can be visible to you on the computer screen but not visible to the audience. To add a professional touch you can use a wireless remote control which allows you to control your slides without having to be at the computer. And it's a snap to print handouts for distribution.

Consider some tips from experienced speakers.

- Pre-visit and get comfortable with the room where your presentation will be held.
- Maximize eye contact with the audience. Smile.
- Anticipate obvious questions from your audience, and have answers and additional information ready.
- Remember that even if you feel nervous, it's probably not that apparent to others.

Summary: The effort you put into your preparation is well worth it and a SCORE Mentor may be able to help. Don't be afraid to give us a call. Realize that your skills as a good presenter will stay with you throughout your business career and social life. The ability to make effective business presentations is a highly-valued skill.