

Presentations without the zzzzz factor

Presentations have the potential to be one of the most engaging and inspirational forms of communications. They're not limited by design costs, they can't be thrown in the bin, they can't be switched off, and that's all because they're face to face. They offer a unique opportunity for the presenter to bring their messages to life and for the audience to interrogate the subject in a way that other media don't allow. It's almost inevitable that a little bit of your knowledge and passion will rub off on your listeners.

Practicalities

When planning your presentation, the first thing to think about is whether there are any restrictions that you need to work within.

- How long have you got for your presentation?
- Do you have to follow a fixed format?
- What facilities and equipment will be available to you?

Purpose and audience

Once you are clear on the practicalities, the next step is to consider the purpose of your presentation, and this involves understanding your audience. Ask yourself:

- Who are you giving a presentation to and why?
- How much do they already know about the subject?
- What are their interests? And what are their needs?
- What effect do you want your presentation to have – does it need to inform, inspire, prove, persuade?

Giving these areas some thought will ensure your presentation hits the mark in terms of relevance and use. Presentations are time consuming to prepare and you don't want the effort to go to waste.

Content

With the purpose clear, it's time to get creative. Let your mind roam around the subject and write down anything that comes into your head. Once you've got a page full of content ideas, start to group them – suitable headings will soon become apparent and you can slot more detailed subject matter underneath them. You may then need to whittle your headings down a bit. Realistically you should aim to cover no more than three main points in a 10 minute presentation.

When you've chosen your three points, spend a bit of time reviewing them in light of the purpose you settled on. Will those points help you meet your objectives? Is the content appropriate for your audience?

Structure

So how should that content be packaged up? Like every good story, a presentation needs a beginning, a middle and an end. Following the structure below will go a long way to ensuring that your presentation is coherent, that it holds the audience's interest and that it has the desired effect.

- 1) Grab the audience's attention. You only have 4-7 seconds to create a good first impression, so a powerful introduction is essential.
- 2) Tell them why they should be interested – what's the purpose of the presentation and what are you trying to achieve?
- 3) Why you? Establish your credibility with the audience.
- 4) Tell them what you're going to tell them – set out the agenda for them.
- 5) Tell them – communicate your main points.
- 6) Tell them what you told them – summarise what you've spoken about and make your parting shot a reminder of what you want your audience to do or think.

Adding interest

Most people have an attention span of 5-10 minutes so try to break your presentation into smaller chunks and add a bit of spice wherever possible. People also retain more information if they're enjoying themselves. Audience interaction, humour, surprise and physical activity are great ways to keep your listeners alert and engaged. You might consider incorporating some of the following into your presentation:

- real life stories
- sound clips
- straw polls
- quotes
- props
- photos
- analogies
- statistics.

Practice and preparation

No matter how well thought through a presentation is, it will only fulfil its potential if it's also well rehearsed and well prepared for.

- Practice out loud to play around with timings and pace, and also to get used to the sound of your own voice.
- Try your presentation out on an honest friend. Is it easy to follow for someone who is coming to it fresh?
- After practicing several times you'll be quite familiar with your presentation, but it's worth preparing some note cards as a safety net. Try to avoid full scripting, though, as this can make the delivery feel wooden and flat.
- Create any handouts and visual aids, such as Powerpoint slides, that will help you communicate your message. Remember to proofread them carefully. These tasks should be some of the last things you do so that they reflect your final,

polished presentation.

- Anticipate what questions might be asked of you and prepare your responses.
- Make sure you know how to get to the venue and work out how long the journey will take you – you don't want to arrive feeling flustered.
- Make a list of everything you need to take with you on the day, such as Powerpoint slides (plus a back up in case of technical difficulties), handouts and props etc.

Coping with nerves

If you feel nervous about speaking in public then you're not alone. Even experienced speakers, who are outwardly very calm, will experience a rush of adrenalin. A few nerves are actually beneficial for your performance so they shouldn't be feared, but the trick is not to let them overcome you. Remember that the audience has come to listen to you because you're the expert! They're on your side and want you to succeed.

On the day

- Wear something comfortable and keep a bottle of water with you.
- Arrive in good time to check the room set up and the audio visual equipment.
- Turn your phone off.
- Take a few deep breaths to slow your heart rate and help you feel calmer.
- Stand tall and try to look like you're enjoying being there.
- Don't forget the formalities in a rush to get your presentation started and finished – introduce yourself, check everyone can see and hear you, and let them know when you will take questions.
- Make an effort to vary your body language, tone, volume and pace to hold people's interest. Move around, but remember not to block the screen if you're using one, and avoid fidgeting.
- Make eye contact with different people in the audience.
- Speak clearly and more slowly than you ordinarily would.
- Pause for breath to avoid a squeaky voice – a pause might feel like a long silence to you, but the audience won't notice a break in speech unless you umm and aah.
- Keep an eye on the time so you don't overrun.

Handling questions

The TRACT mnemonic is a useful way to remember how best to handle questions.

Thank the questioner

Rephrase the question as you have understood or interpreted it

Answer the question

Check whether the person who asked it is satisfied with your response

Thank them again

These steps buy you some thinking time, help the audience keep track of the conversation and ensure your questioners feel listened to.

