

make a connection

frame your message

and practice, practice, practice



Can you give an effective presentation? A good presentation goes beyond knowing your subject matter inside and out. Of course it's important to fully understand your topic of discussion – but if you cannot successfully convey that information to another person, then what does it matter? How successful are your presentations? Is your audience riveted, hanging on every word? Or are they glancing at their watches, drumming their fingers on the desk or – worse yet – dozing off?

In today's business world, companies of all sizes are recognizing the value of training their employees not only how to effectively speak but how to successfully communicate an idea. And these companies are sending not only top-level executives – who address large audiences and the media – but mid-level managers and

salespeople as well. Why? Effective communication has been proven to contribute to anyone's professional advancement and overall success. In the words of James Humes, "the art of communication is the language of leadership."

What common practices are used by the pros to achieve effective communications? For these answers, we turned to three communications professionals – Joey Asher, president of Speechworks, Brenda McClain, president of McClain Communications, and Linda Leatherbury, president of the public relations firm, The Leatherbury Group. Each stressed three major fundamentals – connecting to your audience, framing your message and practice. By doing so, these professionals insist that anyone can make a presentation that is memorable and that reaches the target audience.

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and spurs, not your bedroom slippers.”

– Joey Asher, President of Speechworks

Make a Connection

Every presenter has to connect to the audience. And a good presenter uses several different ways to grab and hold the attention of a group of people. According to Joey Asher of Speechworks, a presentation and communication training company that has advised managers and executives from UPS, The Coca-Cola Company, Hitachi Data Systems and other firms, the most important factor in successfully communicating your message is to keep a constant connection with your “receiver” throughout the presentation.

“You can break all the rules of Presentation Skills 101 – you can stand there in a fig leaf position (hands joined in front of you), you can look stiff, you can dress poorly. But if you are somehow connected with your audience, that’s all that matters,” says Asher.

Asher emphasizes that everything about the way you carry yourself sends a powerful message to your audience. He recommends that you establish a confident connection at the moment you begin to speak and never lose it.

“Come into the room wearing your boots and spurs, not your bedroom slippers,” Asher says. “Come in like you are pumped, like you are glad to be there. Take a look out at the audience – walk in with a spring in your step – and then pause – take a step forward and then start talking.” Asher notes that most people have a tendency to lean back and even step back when they are speaking. He says people should do the opposite when presenting. “Everything about presenting is moving forward. You want to be moving forward because moving forward is being more connected.”

Another way to connect to the audience is to keep doing the one thing that most people do already – eye contact. “Eye contact is the most important thing – it builds relationships,” says Asher. He says to make eye contact with people and “hold it.” When it comes to eye contact with an audience, Asher likens it to having, “random mini-conversations with people.”

Along with eye contact, another extremely important key in effective communication and maintaining a connection with your audience is your voice tone. “Voice energy sells – it sells your idea,” comments Asher. “Volume adds emphasis to an important word or phrase, where a whisper acts as a magnet that draws the audience to you.” He adds, “speaking rapidly excites and energizes the audience, where a slow rate of speech creates a mood of awe and wonder.” Pausing is another vital element to communication, notes Asher. “Pausing allows your audience to comprehend what was said, and it allows you to collect your thoughts. It shows a sign of confidence.”

Frame Your Message

Communications experts agree that a good presentation is a well-built presentation. Brenda McClain of McClain Communications, a media and presentation training company whose clients include BellSouth, AT&T and Georgia-Pacific Corporation, recommends using only a few key points to get your message across to the audience. She also suggests that a speaker should involve examples and stories so that the audience can relate.

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**“If you have eight hours to cut down a
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– Unknown

“Develop one main message, which you can support three or four ways,” says McClain. “This main message should be short, involve the senses – especially visual, as in drawing a ‘word picture’ – in ‘fresh language,’ and easy to understand. The bottom line is that the listener or reader ‘gets’ it and remembers it – and is moved to do the action the speaker has planned.”

Linda Leatherbury, whose firm’s public relations clients include Lucent Technologies, Chick-fil-A and Checkfree, also believes that you should “develop no more than three key messages for the talk and support each message with meaningful illustrations or examples.”

Both McClain and Leatherbury agree that famous speakers are always remembered for certain aspects of their style. McClain believes excellent speakers bring energy to their presentations and speeches as well as engage an audience. “Without naming names,” McClain comments, “let me describe what excellent speakers have in common. They have something of value to say to me – and they mean it. And they bring all of their forces to bear to drive the action they have set out to achieve – whether it’s to persuade, inform or entertain.”

Leatherbury names specific characteristics when it comes to describing some of her favorite speakers. “Martin Luther King Jr. for the eloquence of his remarks; John F. Kennedy for the simplicity of his phrasing; Mario Cuomo for his organized, compelling delivery; and Elizabeth Dole for her ability to gain empathy with the audience.”

Practice, Practice, Practice

The key to becoming good at anything is repetition, and delivering presentations is no different. Asher says that the famous motivational speaker Zig Ziglar would rehearse three hours for every one-hour presentation he would deliver. “It’s the old saying,” Asher says. “If you have eight hours to cut down a tree – you should spend six hours sharpening your saw.” Asher also believes that most people could really help calm their nerves if they would just rehearse what they want to say. “You should rehearse before you do it. People don’t rehearse nearly enough.”

McClain shares Asher’s sentiment when it comes to rehearsing and being prepared. “You prepare your mind and your words. You practice. You give yourself accolades, telling yourself you can do this and you have something of value to say,” advises McClain.

When it comes to addressing a crisis situation where something negative has occurred, preparation is critical. “Don’t go in cold. Go in with a plan,” says Asher. He says most people know what the tough questions will be. The key is to figure out the best way to get your side across. “Answer the questions directly, don’t hide,” but “control the bad news,” Asher recommends.

When dealing with an adverse situation, McClain says that you need to address the audience’s concerns directly. “In a crisis, know that people hang on every word you say. Therefore, I make sure I am in tight control. I apply my ‘knowing to do’ philosophy and ask myself, ‘What do I want the audience to do once they hear from me?’ Typically, in a crisis situation, you want to restore faith. So, I make sure that every word out of my mouth drives that.”

Connect with your audience, frame a few simple points to back up your message and practice your presentation – and you’re on your way to becoming a top-notch presenter.