SEVEN WAYS TO HONE YOUR PRESENTATION SKILLS

- Luncheon speeches
- Personal donor solicitations
- Annual meeting addresses
- Board meeting presentations
- Conference workshops

These are just a few of the speaking opportunities association executives regularly have to provide others with keen insights and new ways of thinking, as well as their expertise and skills.

By Jeffrey Cu Faude
Whether you’re delivering it to a small conference room crowd or a giant annual meeting auditorium, if you hope to transform your speech into a vehicle for climbing the corporate ladder, you’ll need a presentation that’s dressed to impress. Here are seven practical tips to help you build one:

1. **DESIGN WITH THE END IN MIND**

Although it seems obvious, the end of your presentation isn’t the end of the learning process. The real learning occurs when participants go back to the office and try to apply the information they’ve taken from your talk.

It’s natural to focus on what you hope participants will take away from your presentation. To make it truly effective, however, you need to design your session and select your content with the long term in mind, envisioning participants’ thoughts, feelings and actions weeks after your talk. The start of good presentation design still involves selecting outcomes and still requires beginning with the end in mind. The best presenters realize, however, that the end is really just the beginning.

2. **PUT CONTEXT BEFORE CONTENT**

If content is king, then context is the crown. For that reason, consider participant context before selecting presentation content in order to make your presentation specific and relevant. Audience members’ profession or industry; their workplace or organization; their job responsibilities; and their overall knowledge, experience and personal characteristics all should inform the content of your speech.

Marketers often invent consumer profiles when preparing a new product pitch. You should do the same for your presentation, developing a rich portrait of your audience, the issues and opportunities its members face, and their personal demographics and attributes. Creating such a portrait will help you select relevant content segments, examples and presentation techniques that your target audience will find engaging.

3. **START WITH B.S.**

No, not that B.S. And not the other B.S. — bulleted slides — either, as software programs like Keynote and PowerPoint can unnecessarily constrain your thinking at this stage. Start, instead, with a different B.S.: a blank slate.

Blank slating is the freeform identification of the content points, stories, examples, quotes, etc., supporting your presentation outcomes. This approach allows you to complete your thoughts more easily, whether you do it as a mind map, on Post-it® notes or on the computer in a Word document. Once your initial ideas are down on paper, you can then organize, categorize, refine and edit them in order to finalize your presentation content.

Whatever your method, just remember: Think freely, edit faithfully and avoid slide design software.

4. **FOCUS ON TEACHING, NOT TALKING**

Although great content is necessary, it’s not enough. Neither is the classic lecture-followed-by-Q&A presentation format. A sage on the stage that includes memorable stories, compelling content and engaging examples often is far superior. Good presenters therefore think not only about what they’re saying, but also about how they’re saying it.

To avoid putting participants to sleep, identify the various learning formats and teaching techniques that could be used for each of your major content segments. Select techniques that are audience-appropriate and that will effectively catch people’s attention and inspire their involvement.

Finally, because not all audience members respond to the same techniques, step back and make sure you appeal to diverse learning styles and participant contexts.

5. **INCLUDE VALUABLE VISUALS**

Effective visuals offer more than meets the eye. They can enhance learning, for instance, and — when they involve more than just handouts and slides, such as props, videos, posters and flipcharts — also can bring your content to life.

The reason props are so effective is that they offer a simple visual that can metaphorically represent a key theme or point. They can be passed around to engage people’s tactile sense. Short video clips — be they humorous commercials, stock footage purchased online or vignettes you’ve recorded yourself — can illustrate real-life situations. Oversized quotes, questions or news clippings can turn your walls into an art gallery for participants to browse. Table posters placed on cardboard easels offer an up-close visual. And the classic flipchart provides an unplugged, hand-crafted feel that is particularly appropriate for smaller audiences.

Don’t forget, however: The dominant visual of your presentation is you. Because participants should be looking at the presenter, what you wear, where you stand, when and how you move around, and the distance between you and the audience should be deliberate, not haphazard. Think about your body. Although standing behind a podium can project confidence and authority, the podium often blocks shorter or smaller-framed presenters. Standing or sitting unencumbered seems more conversational, but is uncomfortable for many presenters. In smaller rooms, when you aren’t on a riser, moving toward or through the audience can shift their attention and allow you to connect more with individuals.

6. **DESIGN GREAT SLIDES AND HANDOUTS**

Great slides and handouts are by design, not default. If you do handouts, then, design printed materials that support your initial outcomes. Use page layout programs like Pagemaker or InDesign to make materials visually appealing and varied. Always ask: Is this worth the paper and ink required to produce it?

While having design skills can be an asset, it’s not a requirement for creating good handouts and slides. Planning, however, is. When remodeling your home, for instance, you might tear out magazine pages of houses with appealing designs. Do the same thing for handouts and slides, creating both physical and electronic file folders in which you can store slides, handouts, newsletters and other examples of good design. Slideshare.net — think YouTube for slides — is another great source for examples of what to emulate and what to avoid.

With slides, less is almost always more. Keep the total number of slides low, then, and the amount of information on each slide minimal. That said, highly technical talks often require far more information to be visually displayed, so no one rule fits
all situations. A slide deck full of charts requires extra attention to ensure readability. Don’t just import data or a chart without looking to enhance its design.

The bottom line: The best slides tell stories. They reinforce your key points and enhance participants’ understanding and retention of content. Ruthlessly review your deck; any slides that don’t deliver don’t belong.

7. PREPARE TO BE PRESENT
In order to be effective, everything in a presentation — content, context, technique, visuals, handouts, etc. — must be buttressed by the power of presence.

Great presentations crackle with energy and insight. That doesn’t happen when you are held hostage by your scripted slides, notes and outline. In the best sessions, the learning happens in the center of the room, in the space where participants and presenters collide and collaborate.

True presenter-participant collaboration occurs only when the presenter has prepared exhaustively, has ultimate command of the content, and is at ease with modifying format and focus on the fly based on participants’ needs and energy. Facilitating learning is an improvisational skill. The best presenters take the offbeat lines and curves participants throw at them and respond with a resounding, “Yes.” Saying no — reverting to the script — stops the energy, the flow and, ultimately, the learning.

That’s why great presenting is so difficult, but so worthwhile. It requires you to prepare so thoroughly that you can effortlessly reorder your content or change the learning format for a particular segment without participants even knowing you’ve done so. It demands the deepest listening and awareness — to what is being said now, to what has been said before and to what is not being said at all — and to connect these thoughts in real time to the overall content you’re presenting.

Once you complete a session design that you find satisfying, you should therefore direct your attention to all the questions you need to answer and the actions you need to take so that you can be 100 percent present during your presentation. Turning off your cell phone isn’t enough. You have to turn off the rest of the world, too, so that nothing interferes with the incredible opportunity you’ve been given to turn on the learning that participants need, want and appreciate.

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