

Helix Top Tips – for presenting with confidence

For many of us, giving presentations is an inevitable part of our working life. The need to do so comes in many forms – speaking at seminars, presenting information at a regular team meeting, high profile sales presentations to potential clients, or business networking. The list goes on.

For some people, the delivery skills come easily. For many however, the thought of presenting, public speaking, indeed being visible at the front of any group, fills us with abject fear.

According to the London College of Communication, sociophobia – the fear of people or social situations (which covers a multitude of situations, including public speaking), is the second most common phobia in the country. It comes above fear of flying, heights, and death, and is beaten only by the fear of spiders. <http://intranet.lcc.arts.ac.uk/hub/archive/gmd2002/keythemes/phobia/topten.html>.

The Thunderbird Toastmasters' Club put public speaking at the top of the list of fears in the USA. (<http://www.ca.sandia.gov/toastmasters/main.html>)

The ability to present confidently (or seemingly so) can make the difference between keeping your audience interested and engaged, and boring them rigid. Beyond that, it's the sort of skill that can be career making or career breaking.

So what can be done to help overcome your fears and develop your skills so that your presentations, meetings and team briefings are remembered – for the right reasons?

Here are our top tips:

1. Be as prepared as you can be

People usually have the time to adequately prepare for a presentation, or a meeting. They don't always use the time effectively. Those who have done some research, who understand the purpose of the presentation, who know what has gone before and what is coming next (immediately and in a broader sense) are much better placed to deliver a presentation that keeps the attention of their audience. Who has made a presentation before you, who's on next? What happened at the same event last year?

What is the latest industry news? What are your competitors up to? All this can make you appear more knowledgeable and switched-on.

It's not just the content that can then be well planned (I'll come back to that) – it's the venue, the timing, the whole ambience and dynamic of the event as well. And if you think about it, this is critical. If we ask people to sit down and listen in a room where the ambience is soporific, after a carbohydrate rich lunch for example, how can we expect our audience to stay awake? Plan the timing, plan the room, and plan any food you are going to provide. It can make all the difference.

2. Know your audience

Maybe this is really part of being prepared, but it deserves consideration in its own right. A while ago I was talking to a manager who had “drawn the short straw” and had landed the job of delivering a series of presentations to a client. He wasn't relishing the idea, but he told me that he was happy with what he had put together. “Who are you delivering it to?” I asked him. “No idea” was his reply. So how did he know what the content should be?

I have observed a common trait – when asked or told that they are going to deliver a presentation, many people reach automatically for PowerPoint – almost as a security blanket. The order of priority should be this: **The audience. The message. The media.**

When you know the needs of your audience, you can tailor the message accordingly – the right amount of technical information, the right level and so on. So ask questions of them. Brief them first and listen to the feedback – you'll get some good signals that you are heading down the right path. Which leads us to...

3: Be clear about your purpose

What's the point of your presentation? What do you want your audience to go away with? This might be knowledge, key facts, creative thinking. You might want to leave them wanting more, you might want some action.

Whatever it is, be clear about it before you start. It will then be much easier to work out how much of a success it was at the end.

4: Learn the skills

Here's the crux for many people. Just how do you stand up and look and feel confident when there is an audience watching your every move? It's catch 22 really – you have to do it to get better. Developing skills and techniques to help you deliver presentations that are interesting and memorable is a vital step.

For some, it's about developing techniques to avoid common pitfalls such as repetitive nose scratching, awkward hand movements, jangling coins in pockets and the common "errrm". Incidentally – these are all perfectly understandable – you are standing in front of people, and they are looking at you.

Some of the solutions are simple but effective. Try replacing it with something else. One client was about to run some high profile presentations, but his "errrm"s were becoming a problem – at the end of every sentence. The more he told himself to stop saying "errrm", the more he did it. But that's no surprise – it's hard to stop doing things you've been told to stop. Don't think of pink elephants...

Our solution? We got him to squeeze his thumb at the end of every sentence, and to associate the thumb-squeeze with silence. It worked, although he now has a sore thumb. Some expert advice can really help.

It's worth noting that the odd "errrm" or nose-scratch is actually harmless. They're just human traits. It's the repetitive habits that have a detrimental effect.

There are all sorts of skills to be mastered – your own body language and speech, how to interact with the audience, how to portray your own interest and passion in the subject. All of this makes or breaks a presentation. Remember – the audience can't read your mind, so you have to help them follow you and to trust you. It involves eye contact, pace, pitch and intonation, being aware of and reacting to the audience's responses. You'll also need to deal with the inevitable cock-ups and smelling mistakes, so do this naturally, without too much explanation or apology.

Don't let your lions go to sleep – but don't poke them either. They bite! Treat them with respect, and feed them.

5: What are you trying to say?

You've done a lot of the hard work already, so make sure you put the right message across. Make it right for the audience and right for you. You've got to be able to explain what you are saying, and to answer any questions that arise.

Questions are a good thing. They can bring a presentation to a lively and satisfying conclusion, so factor this in when designing the content of your presentation. What questions are likely to come out of what you have said? Then prepare for them.

Keep the message simple – it's tempting try and say everything. But your audience probably doesn't need it all. Chief executives are looking for a different level of detail than an operational or project manager, so put the right bits in. This will help greatly when you get to tip six.

Structure the message. Make sure it flows. Make sure that any links between sections are clear, make references to sources of data, use graphs, charts, pictures, video. There are many ways to communicate a message, so think about it carefully, and always have the audience in mind.

6: Tame the beast – use technology wisely

Imagine life without PowerPoint. It's a great tool, but too many presenters let the software and projector run their presentations.

You need to be in control. You need to have interesting visual aids that really add something to your presentation. Then when the power cut happens, you are not left high and dry.

The temptation is to put too much in the slides. They only need the key points (as do your speaker's notes) – it's the job of the presenter to weave the rest of the information around them. And have a back-up - things can go wrong. Make sure you can write legibly and straight on a humble flip-chart. It's amazing how many people struggle to do this.

Have you ever been to a presentation where each slide swoops into view from a different direction, at a different speed, in a different colour and font? It's true that the software will let you do this, but so often it just doesn't help. Getting a really good visual aid put together might involve a little help - some training for example, or getting colleagues with the skills to do that part for you.

You also need to be able to move forward and backwards through the presentation without having to stop and think about it. Learn the ways to do this on your laptop or computer. If you are using a remote control, how does it work? Find these things out before the lions are sitting there watching you. Then there are some simple little things like getting rid of the projected image for a while whilst a discussion evolves – just press the 'B' key on the laptop and it goes

blank. Press 'B' and it comes back. These little things can really help. Incidentally, 'W' makes the screen go white.

7: Practice, practice, practice...

You know you should – so invest the time. It's worth its weight in gold. You can practice in private in front of a mirror, in front of a small test group of colleagues or in front of friends and family. You can even do it by phone or web-cam.

Practice also includes the live events. The truth is, the more presentations you do, the less the nerves will affect you (assuming you apply the principles above). Volunteer for them, chair meetings, go to networking events, get involved with a drama group, become a toastmaster... The opportunities are many and varied, and they all help develop that sense of confidence that impresses people – think about how you want to come across in a job interview.

Being familiar with the material is also critical if you want to be able to deliver with authority and confidence. Your presentation needs to look un-scripted (so have notes with you, rather than a script). You need to be able to answer any questions that arise, so learn the facts and the details.

8: Get some feedback

It helps to cement the learning, and aids further skills development. Listen to what people say. They will undoubtedly think better of your presentation than you do (unless you have a very large ego!). The nerves don't show on the outside as much as you feel them on the inside.

Use of video as a feedback tool can work very well. You might not like what you see, but it is exactly what everyone else will see.

9: Do it all again

Seriously – the more you do, the more you learn, the better you get, the easier it becomes, the better the results.

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