

Don't Just Stand There—Stand Out!

Effective Presentation Skills

BY CANDY TYMSON CSP

I was at a conference of a professional association recently and was appalled by the number of speakers who were simply, well—how can I say this delicately, boring!

Speaker after speaker read their notes, most in a monotonous tone; bland PowerPoint presentations were the order of the day and as a result, the majority of the audience simply were not listening. They were not involved in the presentations at all. (In fact I noticed that many were doing other work, doodling or carefully tearing the wrapper from the *Minties* on the table to create one long, thin line of paper!)

The importance of involving the audience during a presentation really came home to me some years ago when I was the speaker, prior to lunch, at a conference for public relations professionals. During the afternoon sessions, I noticed that every speaker referred back to things I had said that morning—very profound statements, most of which I hadn't made! It was then that I realised that because my presentation was entertaining—I was memorable.

Ways To Involve The Audience

The most successful speakers have learnt the power of involving the audience during their presentations. Even if you are not a very confident public speaker there are a number of simple techniques you can use which will involve the audience and have them hanging on your every word! Here are a few simple ideas:

Tell a Story

Have you noticed that often you can't remember the specific things someone said, but you nearly always remember the stories they told? Telling stories is one of the most impactful ways I know to involve an audience.

A simple technique is: *make a point—tell a story*. For example, when I run presentation skills programs I tell the story about my first speech and the things that went terribly wrong. The conclusion of the story is how I learnt to build instant rapport with the audience, in a rather spectacular way. The impact of the story made the point about building rapport, very memorable. (There is a magic formula to telling stories that I teach in my programs).

Use Variety

Are you using a variety of visual aids in your presentations? Don't fall into the false security of relying on a computerised presentation to carry you through. Lots of words, in small print, are always boring and hard to read. Add the corporate logo in the corner of every slide and you definitely have 'death by PowerPoint'. (Remember the 1/6/6/ Rule for each slide which is one thought, total of six words per line, total of six lines per slide).

Can you pass something around for the audience to touch, smell or feel? What about actually demonstrating how something works rather than just telling them?

I was at a presentation a couple of years ago where the CEO of Apple Computer was talking about where the company was heading. The audience of senior executives were generally interested in what he had to say, but what really got their attention was the cute, briefcase-size kid's computer that he passed around for everyone to look at, and play with! As well as getting their attention it clearly demonstrated Apple's continuing creative approach to computer design.



The Power of Questions

So often presenters leave it until question time to give people the opportunity to participate in their presentation by asking a question. However, a very effective technique is to ask the audience a question during your presentation. What happens when someone asks you a question? (Did you notice that your brain is automatically thinking about the question I just asked you?). When you ask questions, people automatically think about it—and that's involving them.

If you don't want them to actually answer you, simply ask it as a rhetorical question, for example: "have you ever wondered what it would feel like to have an audience hanging on your every word?" However, if you **do** want them to respond, a good technique is to raise your hand after asking a question, so that they know you want them to raise their hand to respond. You can then choose someone to answer the question.

Make It Personal

And a final idea which is very effective, yet oh so subtle, is the use of the word 'you'. Even if there are 400 people in the audience saying "as you know", or "I'm sure you have seen" or "are you aware" ... makes the statement very personal. In contrast avoid terms like "everyone knows", "people", "folks", and the worst of them all—"you all" which are not personal and therefore don't have as much impact as simply using the word 'you'.

Remember The Three P's

It is reported that Winston Churchill, one of the world's greatest speech makers, spent on average 7 hours writing and preparing every 40 minute speech. The only way to be great is to "practise, practise, practise".

If it is some time since you have brushed up on your presentation skills, it may be time to update your style. What was considered a good presentation five years ago could be seen as boring and old fashioned today.

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