

Giving Great Presentations

Your goal as a speaker is to be relevant to your audience, engage them, have them learn something and then perhaps persuade them to do something with this newfound knowledge. To succeed at this you need to be compelling, which is defined as “evoking interest or attention in a powerfully irresistible way.” So how do you accomplish this? Whether you’re giving a talk to ten people or 500, here are some important things that will make you a better presenter.

1. Show your Passion and Connect with your Audience

Time and again, the great presenters say that the most important thing is to connect with your audience, and the best way to do that is to let your passion for the subject shine through. Be honest with the audience about what is important to you and why it matters. Be enthusiastic and honest, and the audience will respond.

2. Turn nervousness into excitement

It’s hard to be relaxed and be yourself when you’re nervous. However, you can turn your nervousness into excitement. The body’s signs of nervousness; clammy hands, pounding heart and tense nerves can be reinterpreted as the side effects of excitement and exhilaration. When you’re standing in front of your audience you will likely have these same feelings of nervousness. That’s when you can say to yourself, “I’m not nervous, I’m excited!” This can really have a miraculous impact in helping you change your attitude to what you’re about to do.

3. Focus on your Audience’s Needs

Your presentation needs to be built around what your audience is going to get out of the presentation.

As you prepare the presentation, you always need to bear in mind what the audience needs and wants to know, not what you can tell them.

While you’re giving the presentation, you also need to remain focused on your audience’s response to you and what you are saying, and react to that. However, dismiss the people frowning their brows, crossing their arms or shaking their heads “no.” Instead, focus only on your supporters, the people who are visibly engaged, enjoying your presentation and nodding “yes.” If you find the audience members who are positively interacting with you, you’ll be much more confident and relaxed than if you try to convince the naysayers.

4. Keep it Simple: Concentrate on your Core Message

When planning your presentation, you should always keep in mind the question: What is the key message (or three key points) for my audience to take away? You should be able to communicate that key message very briefly. If what you are planning to say doesn’t contribute to that core message, don’t say it.

5. Smile and Make Eye Contact with your Audience

This sounds very easy, but a surprisingly large number of presenters fail to do it. If you smile and make eye contact, you are building rapport, which helps the audience to connect with you and your subject. It also helps you to feel less nervous, because you are talking to individuals, not to a great mass of unknown people. To help you with this, make sure that you don't turn down all the lights so that only the slide screen is visible. Your audience needs to see you as well as your slides.

Instead of panning and scanning the whole audience, try to directly look at specific audience members throughout your speech. If you can, give each person that you intently look at an entire sentence or thought, without breaking your gaze. When you finish a sentence, move on to another person and keep connecting with individual people until you're done speaking. This tactic not only creates a deeper connection with individuals but the entire audience can feel it.

6. Start strongly

The beginning of your presentation is crucial. You need to grab your audience's attention and hold it. We live in an era of high entertainment, and when we sit people in a room to watch a presentation, we need our presentations to start with a bang. So don't waste that on explaining who you are. Start by entertaining them.

You can start with a compelling quote, a great story, a stunning statistic, an attention-grabbing (but useful) image on a slide or, even a provocative question. The key is to get people's attention. Then you can introduce yourself and your topic.

Also, use the ideas to close out your presentation with a bang as well, because people do remember the beginning and the end of everything.

7. Tell stories

Human beings are programmed to respond to stories. Stories help us to pay attention, and also to remember things. If you can use stories in your presentation, your audience is more likely to engage and to remember your points afterwards. The stories are not just stories for stories' sake. They illustrate the key points that you are discussing. This makes the presentation much more memorable. Also, think about the overall story you are trying to tell your audience, and create your presentation to tell it. Think about the overall story you want to tell and how you want people to react. What's the big takeaway? How do you want the audience to think and feel after your presentation? This is essential whether you're presenting to 10 people or 1,000.

8. Use your voice effectively

The spoken word is actually a pretty inefficient means of communication because it uses only one of your audience's five senses. That's why presenters tend to use visual aids, too. But you can help to make the spoken word better by using your voice effectively.

Varying the speed at which you talk, and emphasising changes in pitch and tone all help to make your voice more interesting and hold your audience's attention. Also, it is impossible to speak too slowly, you can take several seconds between each of your words and people... will... hang... on... your... every... word. It really works.

When you get nervous, it's not just your heart beat that quickens. Your words also tend to speed up. Audiences want you to succeed, but the more you rush, the more you turn them off. If you just take a moment and take a long, deep breath, the audience will wait for you.

9. Body language

It has been estimated that more than three quarters of communication is non-verbal. That means that as well as your tone of voice, your body language is crucial to getting your message across. Make sure that you are giving the right messages some body language to avoid includes; crossed arms, hands held behind your back or in your pockets, and pacing back and forth.

Make your gestures open and confident and move naturally around the stage and, among the audience too, if possible.

10. Breathe

If you find presenting difficult, it can be hard to be calm and relaxed about doing it. One option is to start by concentrating on your breathing. Slow it down, and make sure that you're breathing fully. Make sure that you continue to pause for breath occasionally during your presentation too.

If you can bring yourself to relax, you will almost certainly present better. If you can actually start to enjoy yourself, your audience will respond to that, and engage better. Your presentations will improve exponentially, and so will your confidence. It's well worth a try.