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Tips on Making an Effective Presentation

by Philip J. Lehpamer

At last year's Society of Actuaries annual meeting, Gerald August, a communication consultant, conducted a session on Presentation Skills. This article is a summary of that meeting and includes several tips that may assist you with your next presentation.

Mr. August personally greeted most of the meeting participants as they entered the room before the presentation actually started. His first tip was:

1) If you want to feel comfortable in front of a new group, meet the people that come in. When someone asks you to give a talk, your first question should be, "What do you want me to talk about?" Perhaps the topic is not really my area. Who is the audience? Is the purpose to inform? Is it to persuade? Should I give the talk? What's my objective? It is critical to know your objective before you start to plan the presentation. You should be very specific about what you talk about. If you can't give an overview in one sentence, you haven't figured it out. Once you have specifically stated the target, the most important element in putting together your presentation in terms of content is — time. How long will you talk? Unless you have a time limit, you don't know where to stop, and as a result, you ramble. Therefore, you should self-impose a time limit so that you deliver a tight presentation and add value to every minute for your audience.

If you have only five minutes to make your talk, state the most important fact first. Then give the second most important fact, followed by the third and fourth until you bump against your time limit and then stop. If you have more time, just keep expanding each item. In this way, you have total control, not only over the content, but the length of the presentation. To summarize Mr. August's second tip remember the four Ts:

2) Set your Topic, Target and Time to keep your presentation Tight.

An informative presentation should be organized along the principle, "Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, and finally tell them what you told them." If you follow this principle, Mr. August is confident that you will always give a clear, concise talk,

because everyone will be able to follow you. This principle is summarized:

3) Tell them, tell them, tell them.

A persuasive presentation should start with an opportunity and background. The main point should be what you want the audience to do. You should list the benefits to your listeners and then give proof of the benefits. Then you need to restate the main point and benefits. Finally, you would state specifically what the audience should do now.

Once you have organized your talk and practiced it once into a tape recorder, you are ready for the next question, "What visual, if any, do I need?" It is not necessary to use any visuals for many presentations. Sometimes the expectations of the audience may require visuals but do not let those visuals detract from your topic, target or time. Reasons for including them are to recall information, to control the attention of the listener, to make information easier to understand, or to reinforce what's being said in the presentation.

When using visual aids, it is important to speak to a person, not to a visual aid. You use your hands to direct the listener's attention, standing to the right of the visual as you face the audience so that their eyes will come back to you. Each visual should be limited to one idea captured by a headline. You should write in phrases, not sentences, with a maximum of six lines per visual, large enough to see. You don't just read the visual aid but expound in detail.

4) You will never deliver a boring presentation if you humanize it. Thus, you should relate your talk to actual people and events, but you should not exaggerate or lie. Humor is anything that puts the spirit of fun into the presentation. You should get excited in your delivery because if you can reach out and touch your audience you will be home free. Here eye contact, body language and delivery are important.

5) Look at the more friendly faces in the audience, and make eye contact with an individual before you speak. Direct a thought or a sentence to that person. Do not speak unless looking at someone and react to the visual cues from that person.



6) Stand solidly on the floor, in balance. If you move, do so with purpose and don't pace. Use gestures to support what you are saying.

7) Speak a little faster on the unimportant words and speak a little slower on the important words. Lowering or raising your voice gets attention and use longer pauses to emphasize a point.

If you are dealing with a hostile audience, learn where they are coming from and try to empathize. Acknowledge their position and try to find common ground. Promote your position in a positive way and don't knock down other positions.

During questions and answers, pay full attention to the question. Keep your answer as short as possible but don't just use one word. For difficult questions, use a lead-in to give yourself thinking time. At the risk of putting your foot in your mouth or opening a can of worms:

8) Answer only the question. Do not bluff or make things up — it is okay to say you don't know.

Finally, there are general tips to consider:

9) Arrive early to control the room and technology as much as possible.

10) Ask the audience for feedback.

11) Practice with toastmasters, colleagues, peers and friends.

Remembering these basic tips can go far in making your next presentation a success!

Philip J. Lehpamer, FSA, MAAA, is vice president and actuary at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in New York, NY. He can be reached at plehpamer@metlife.com.