

Perfect your Presentation Pitch: A Presentation on Presentations

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Abstract

We all want to share information with our peers. As industry conferences grow in number and attendance (PhUSE, PharmaSUG, NESUG, etc) and topics and approaches to industry needs evolve, we all want to learn from each other and share information that will make our day to day jobs easier. After all, why re-invent the wheel if you can leverage something already in existence? Enter the conference paper/poster. If you have something to share—it's important that you keep your audience in mind. Your topic will come across more successfully if you speak the language of the audience or keep it generic enough for all to understand.

Introduction

We've all been there: tight timelines, mandatory trainings, overlapping projects. You're sitting in a mandatory meeting and your mind drifts to other tasks as a Powerpoint presentation is being read to you. Or, a presentation title at a conference grabs your attention only to sit for 30 minutes in a conference room reviewing a slide presentation of code and datasets delivered in monotone. What does this mean for the information delivered to you in these presentations? It's likely lost in the fog of work. Now put yourself in the role of the presenter. You have something important for your team to learn. Or, you've stumbled across a programming method that makes your life easier and you want to share it with your team (or the world even). And now you're in front of a room full people, heads down in their laptops or phones, and you see it – the fog of work. This does not mean that the information is unimportant to the audience or presenter, it just means you have to capture their attention in a way that is meaningful.

Let's give your talk the attention it deserves! Let's make our valuable time invaluable! There are ways to make your presentation POP! for everyone. Let's get going!

Reel'em In!

Be positive! Enthusiasm for your topic will get your audience's energy flowing. Education, passion, and engagement are in a reciprocal relationship. While this may seem like common sense, this is also backed up by data. A recent Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index poll found that teachers who are engaged, with their topic and audience, have a greater feeling of well-being in their personal and professional lives (Hastings, Agrawal, 2015). An enthusiastic presentation benefits both presenter and audience. The presenter's eagerness to engage with the audience is catching and will draw the audience into your presentation.

Be sure to connect with your audience. There are two questions that support this. Do you know your audience? Do a little research prior to presenting. Find out about your audience – where will you be presenting, what audience size can you anticipate, technical vs. non-technical attendees, what roles does your audience represent. Tailoring your presentation to your audience shows that you care about not only what you have to say, but how your audience hears it. Does your audience know you? When you begin your presentation, share a little background on yourself, framework for your data, or context for your presentation. By establishing a rapport with your audience, you encourage the listeners to buy in to what you are promoting.

Give the audience something to think about. From a brand new CDISC process to "Proc Print: Our Old Friend" to explaining the new hours for the company wellness center, the essential goal of every presentation should be educating your audience. If this knowhow excites you, share it! However, if a topic makes you, the presenter, bored, it will likewise make your audience bored. Ultimately, a

presentation that provides something of value to its audience means that the attendees will feel engaged and (maybe hopefully) spread your information on to others.

Pitch Perfect!

When writing for a presentation, remember that you are speaking and not reading. Prepare what you're going to say from your source and practice it. "Practice breeds competence, and competence breeds confidence," Victor Lipman declared (Lipman, 2015). It's common sense that bears repeating because public speaking is a skill that does not often get reinforced in technical fields. Familiarity with your content will strengthen your assurance and consequently your presentation. Another benefit of practice is that it underscores the timing of your speech. Know how long you are given to present and stick close to that limit. A good presentation can be sunk by running out of time to share all your ideas. Presentations are valuable teaching tools constrained by delivery method and time; papers can be read anytime, anywhere.

What is the primary goal of your presentation? Know the one critical point in your presentation -- then make it clear. "Clear" can be defined by two words: focused and concise.

Stay focused. Early on in presentation preparation, define what you want to communicate to your audience and why does your message matter to you and the audience. As you prepare, narrow the focus of your presentation to one principal topic then build your presentation to support that topic. Ask yourself, "Would I want to hear about the topic I am presenting? What is most significant about that topic?" A presenter concentrated on one topic that matters to themselves and the audience demonstrates the importance of that topic. Likewise, style your presentation to fit your audience. Audiences range in size, represented roles, and motivation for joining. An informal discussion moderated by the presenter may be more appropriate for a small staff meeting; a prepared speech followed by a question & answer session is better suited for larger audiences (for example, a PhUSE conference). Presenters, conscious of their audience, organize and deliver their information to the benefit of their listeners. A good presentation can be derailed by driving your train of thought into too many directions. A focused presentation provides direct information and its benefits to the audience.

Remain concise. There's a classic joke from the 1985 comedy *Clue* that can also be applied to too many presentations. The butler: "To make a long story short..." The guests: "Too late!" (Hill, Lynn, 1985). Be conscious of what you want to say and how you are going to say it. A succinct presentation flows with substance and purpose and won't get mired in superfluous details. Depending on the topic, your presentation should avoid vagueness, embellishments that do not add to the presentation, and redundancies but use a precise and active tone. These will help you get to the point and your audience will appreciate it!

Please bear in mind that, as a presenter, it's very easy to "bury the lede". This idiom refers the journalistic gaffe of concealing your primary topic in too many, or possibly misleading, details (*Why Do We 'Bury the Lede'?* n.d.). A deceptive title may draw in a crowd at a conference but leave them frustrated at an unrelated topic or perhaps forgoing another talk. While tailoring your presentation to the audience, remember that topics and detail should be jargon-free – lean towards more general rather than technical terminology. Multiple, undefined acronyms leave an audience puzzled, distracted, and trying to sort out what they just heard. Poor examples can confuse your audience and leave them with more questions than answers; bad examples can alienate your audience.

Respect your Audience!

You've taken the time to prepare. You've spent time writing papers and creating slides. You communicated with the proper folks to get on the agenda. You are now in front of your audience - physically or digitally, small room or large conference hall. All eyes are on you. It's time to respect your audience! Regard your assembly with the same energy and courtesy that you would like to see extended to you. Remember to be mindful of your shared time with the audience. Your presentation is typically given an allotted time in an agenda; attention can spoil when presentations run over that time. Finally, be positive! The benefits of positivity are numerous (paper-worthy!) and your excitement about the presentation can be contagious.

A presentation can quickly derail by not remembering one simple rule: don't insult your audience. Avoid assumptions, slights, and condescension. It sure sounds easy enough, but assuming your audience is familiar with your terminology can devalue your information. What may seem like a simple joke, may offend your audience. The genesis of this paper dawned at a conference where a speaker began by disparaging some attendees' roles; subsequently, James took four pages of notes on how to lose a crowd's attention and no longer remembers what the original topic was. While fun to reminisce, this is now lost time – which could have been spent working or at another exhibition - and lost information – something that may have been useful in day to day work.

Respecting your audience also means respecting your material. All presentations are stories – stories of data, techniques, insight, and business. Know your story. Know your motivation for telling your story. Know your content so completely that you are comfortable giving your presentation with no visuals at all. Familiarity with your subject fosters comfort talking about it. Try to incorporate audience participation— get them involved if possible by asking a question or two of them to keep them engaged, but keep it moving, don't get mired in too much detail.

Knowing your material means practicing your material. Be humble, and play to your strengths—even if they're weaknesses. If you're funny — tell a tasteful joke but be mindful of your audience. If you're nervous — let the audience know as it builds empathy and allows them relax with you. If you're a story teller - weave some stories into it but don't read slides.

Your final opportunity to respect your audience is by closing with a Question & Answer session. Q&A allows you to generously interact with your audience if you have not already done so. It provides the audience an opportunity to clarify what they've learned and to connect with you. It provides the audience a final moment to learn more about what you've taught. And it offers you the occasion to solicit and incorporate feedback. Give answers to the best of your ability. As a presenter and gatekeeper of your information, availability and approachability are key to connecting with your audience. If you don't have an immediate answer to offer for a question, request to get back to the inquirer after the presentation, get contact information, and follow through!

In Closing!

Have fun (be positive)! Presenting is a way to increase your visibility and strengthen your role in the team, your clinical matrix and statistics & programming community. Winston Churchill posited, "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." Don't expect all of your presentations to go perfectly and don't let it discourage you. Every time you speak in public, it will strengthen your skills and reinforce what works best for you and your topics. As with every skill, whether hard or soft, there are multiple resources within reach to assist you, to support your growth. TED talks and Toastmasters are well established and easily found on the internet; your colleagues, friends and family are likely willing audience participants who you may rely on for constructive criticism and assistance. Now, go forth and impart to your audience. We're waiting to hear you!

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