

Effective Presentations

Insider Tips for Improving Your Skills



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We've all been there. You spend money to attend a conference, select a session from a long list of competing topics, and walk into the room only to walk out several minutes later because the speaker is so boring that even she is falling asleep. Sound familiar?

As both an attendee and a frequent speaker at conferences, I'm amazed at how universally bad some presentations can be. It doesn't have to be that way. Preparing a good presentation can actually be easier than developing a bad one.

What's Your Story?

A presentation is essentially a story. To make sense, it must have a beginning, middle and an end and the flow through these parts must be logical and smooth. You begin developing your story by identifying what you expect to accomplish with your presentation. To be effective, your presentation must do more than just provide an information dump – it must demonstrate the value of that information and challenge the listener to do something with it.

This is where most presentations fall down. Many speakers fail to grasp that the point of a presentation is to provoke a change in the audience's condition. This can be done by providing a deeper insight into the subject, encouraging a change of attitude or raising awareness. Just providing data without some sort of analysis and call to action makes for an extremely boring presentation.

So what's your story? You should be able to sum up what you want to accomplish in your presentation in a single sentence or two. I'm not talking about the things you plan to do in the presentation but rather the central theme that will bind your presentation together, the single idea that you want the audience to take away. Once you have that theme, the rest of your presentation will flow from it.

To develop the theme, begin with an outline of your key points. These key points should support your theme and be organized in a logical sequence, e.g. general to specific, chronological, increasing importance, etc. There should not be too many of them – I've seen presentations collapse under the weight of too much material.

Once you have the framework of key points, you can begin to really build the presentation. Under each of the key points, identify two to three items that will illustrate the point. These supporting items could be a personal story, a case study, or historical examples.

This is where you generate interest and hold the attention of the audience. People love to be told stories and to be entertained. You can really reach them if you take the time to select examples that are particularly relevant to the audience.

Recently, I was asked to give a fairly standard preparedness presentation at the annual conference of the Textile Rental Services Association. My contact was kind enough to grant me access to their newsletter archives and to arrange a tour of a local facility and interview with the managers there. By incorporating examples of how laundry services had performed in several disasters, I was able to make what could have been a stock presentation extremely interesting and relevant to the audience.

Fitting the Pieces Together

With the theme, key points, and illustrations you've got most of your presentation done. However, the two most critical points of any presentation are the opening and the closing.

The opening is important because this is where you grab the attention of the audience. Fail to do so and you may never get it back. Don't waste time with jokes that are irrelevant to the presentation. Instead, use a startling fact, an historical example or a story to lead them into the presentation.

I opened the TRSA presentation mentioned above by telling a story about the experiences of a laundry company in the 1993 Midwest Floods. The audience was hooked from that point on because the story was relevant to them and to the presentation that followed.

Our standard method of closing is to ask for questions, then let the audience drift out. This diffuses the impact of your presentation. The audience leaves thinking about the last question (or lack of questions!) rather than your central theme.

A more effective approach used by management consultant Alan Weiss is to pause for questions and let the audience know that you will have some final concluding remarks. You can then use your final remarks to emphasize your theme and issue your call to action.

The call to action is another thing that is frequently missing from presentations. You've just spent 45 minutes or more of my time providing me with information. What do you want me to do with it? The answer to this question should be uppermost in the mind of your audience as they leave the room.

Now that you've got the pieces identified, tie them together by rehearsing. I personally tend to rehearse different pieces over time, and then do a full run through at least once to make sure I've got my timing down.

One of the most important pieces of advice I've ever received came from Alan Weiss. Don't memorize your speech, internalize it. If you memorize your speech, it sounds canned and an unforeseen event can throw you off track. If you internalize it, that is, understand what you want to say and how you want to say it, you have a

great deal of flexibility. You can lengthen or shorten your speech to accommodate time issues, you can have additional stories and examples on hand if needed, and you can modify your presentation based on audience reaction. Note that this is not the same as “winging it”.

Death by PowerPoint

You’ll notice that so far I haven’t said a word about PowerPoint. That’s because preparing a PowerPoint presentation is really irrelevant to building your presentation. If you have outlined your presentation with key points and supporting examples and if you have internalized your presentation, you really don’t need PowerPoint. You should be able to give your presentation without using a single slide.

The single biggest problem that I have found in presentations is a misuse of PowerPoint. Unfortunately, it has evolved into a crutch for speakers, an electronic substitute for notes.

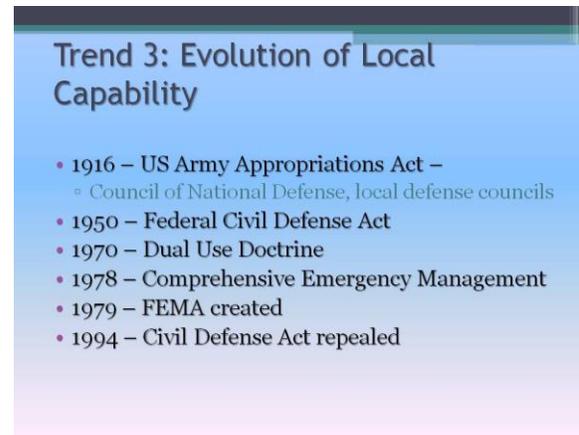
So what do speakers usually do wrong? One word: TEXT. We feel the need to use the outline function and put lots of words on the screen.

There are two things wrong with this:

1. If they’re reading your slide, they’re not listening to you.
2. If they can get all the information they need from the slide, why do they need you in the first place?

So how do you use PowerPoint? Garr Reynolds, author of Presentation Zen, suggests the use of pictures and quotes or meaningful graphs. This both conveys information more clearly and keeps the focus on you, the speaker.

Let’s look at a couple of examples. The following slide was intended to describe how local emergency managers evolved.



Trend 3: Evolution of Local Capability

- 1916 – US Army Appropriations Act –
 - Council of National Defense, local defense councils
- 1950 – Federal Civil Defense Act
- 1970 – Dual Use Doctrine
- 1978 – Comprehensive Emergency Management
- 1979 – FEMA created
- 1994 – Civil Defense Act repealed

This rather boring slide can be replaced with a single quote, with the detail contained not on the slide but in the speaker’s notes.



The single most significant societal change that has most altered community preparedness has been the increased professionalization of local emergency managers.

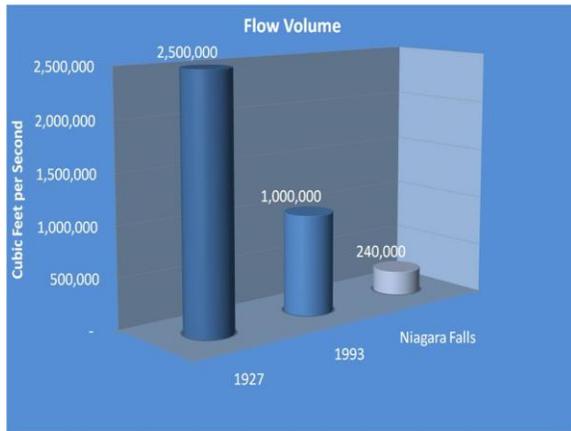
Thomas E. Drabeck
Major Themes in Disaster Preparedness and Response Research
 1993
 PUBLIC SAFETY, PUBLIC TRUST

Notice that the second slide sums up the importance of the emergency manager’s role rather than just serving as a set of notes to keep you on track. Which works better for your audience?

Let’s look at another example. Consider the following table of information which is intended to show enormous scope of the Great Flood of 1927. It’s interesting but it doesn’t provoke a reaction.

| | 1927 Flood | 1993 Flood | Niagara Falls |
|--------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Volume | 2,500,000 CFS | 1,000,000 CFS | 240,000 CFS |

Now look at the following graphic developed from the same information.



Notice how the scope of the 1927 flood is immediately apparent to the audience? The slide makes this point without you having to say a single word.

Ideally, your slide presentation should be meaningless to anyone that gets a copy after your presentation. After all, if they could get the key points of your presentation from your slide show, why bother going to your presentation?

This brings us to the point of handouts. All too often, we create incredibly complex slides that are unreadable, and then apologize to the audience. Edward Tufte, an expert on information design, says that PowerPoint is the worst way to provide complex information and suggests the use of handouts instead.

Unfortunately, we usually limit our handouts to copies of the slide presentation. If, as I mentioned above, your PowerPoint is meaningless, this is a very poor take away

except for those few who actually used it for note taking.

Instead, consider something that actually provides useful information. My personal preference is a one or two page handout that includes an outline of my presentation, a list of references that I used in developing the presentation, and my contact information. This handout provides the audience with a summary of my key points and resources for obtaining more information without burdening them with 10 pages of tiny, unreadable slides.

Why Not Go First Class?

Preparing a presentation in the manner I've suggested does require a change in how we currently do presentations. You won't have the comfort of the outline showing on the screen and you may actually have to memorize data or refer to your notes. But on the other hand, identifying your theme and key points actually makes it easier to put a presentation together. Internalizing your presentation allows you to stay better focused and you can still use the photos and quotes as cues for what you want to discuss.

So stop boring your audience and yourself. It really doesn't take all that much more effort to do a first class presentation.

