Taking The Trauma Out of the Talk

Records and information management professionals need not fear speaking before an audience if they put planning and thought into their presentations

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High-visibility tasks, performed well, serve to establish a person’s credibility and competence. Few endeavors offer opportunities to attain greater visibility as much as business presentations do. Visibility is the watchword of success. It is essential for individual career advancement, and it can provide the records and information management (RIM) professional a leading edge. When effective, presentations are a proven means for people to distinguish themselves from the norm.

Right or wrong, how people stand and speak shape the opinion that others form about their competence. When someone stands and says what they want to say, in the way that they want to say it, they are doing what 95 percent of the people in the audience wish they could do. A person who is confident in front of a group gives off an air of competence, whereas a person who fumbles leaves a negative impression.

Following the three P’s of powerful presentations – preparation, practice and performance – can provide the RIM professional improved skills to create winning presentations.

Preparation

Few people prepare adequately for a presentation. The problem is exacerbated in the workplace because managers expect employees to be working, and they may consider fine tuning presentations to be play rather than work. Preparation means more than just throwing together a bunch of slides in PowerPoint. Planning is an important investment of time; good initial planning helps ensure that preparation is wisely directed.

An effective presentation is defined as one that produces the desired results.

Military strategists, coaches, organizational leaders, and salespeople know that their efforts are more likely to succeed when they are guided by a plan. Effective presenters know this, too.

There are three major steps in the planning process:

• Defining the goal and message
• Conducting audience analysis
• Developing the approach and strategies

Defining the Goal and Message

In their book Structuring Speech, Gerald Phillips and Jerome Zolten call this step the critical one in speech preparation. They write, “Figure out exactly what you want to communicate to your audience. Whether spoken or written, formal or informal, the fate of a message depends on two things: the ability of the communicator to isolate his purpose clearly, and the ability to coordinate personal resources to achieve his purpose.”

A presentation’s basic purpose will fall into one of the following categories:

• To persuade or convince. This type of presentation is seeking approval or
support for a new program or idea.

- **To inform.** This could be an orientation to a new program or procedure, a classroom lecture, or a status report.
- **To inspire.** The primary purpose of this type of presentation is to “fire up the troops.” This could also fall under the heading of persuasion.
- **To entertain.** An example is welcoming new employees or making a presentation at a retirement party.

- Is it achievable? Is the plan to ask the company to invest $100,000 just after announced cutbacks and budget cuts? Can the people in the audience actually approve such a project or are they a stepping stone to the next level?
- Is it a present or ultimate objective? Will the desired result likely occur at this specific presentation? If not, then what is possible with this presentation?

- Is it measurable? Although this criterion may not fit all objectives, in determining whether the presentation was a winner, a well-defined end product provides a yes or no.
- Is it sound business? Is it good for the bottom line? Will it protect the company in litigation? What is the payback?

Determine what will be the main message in the presentation. Don’t confuse the main message with the subject. The main message will be the focal point of the entire presentation. Nothing should be included or generated if it does not tie in to or support that main message.

James Beveridge and Edward Velton apply this concept to proposals in their book *Creating Superior Proposals*: “A good proposal opens with a message. It closes with a message. And in between you keep socking home the message … You dare not state any proposal effort without knowing just what your message will be.” This advice is equally valid for presentations.

It would be helpful at this point to also identify three or four main points of the main message. One way to do this is to envision a summary visual for the presentation and assume that is all the audience will see. What must be included on that visual? Those points, though they may change as the presentation develops, will provide some useful clarity and guidance.

**Conduct Audience Analysis**

Who is the intended audience? The audience is the principal cog in the whole presentation – its target – the reason for its very existence. The most fundamental rule for successful persuasion, said Henry Boettinger in *Moving Mountains*, is to “start where they are, not where you are. In order to start where an audience is, you must know something about them. Their familiarity with the subject, their present attitudes toward it, past views on similar subjects, what they are anxious about, limitations on their actions, and their goals in life all contribute to what they call their position.”

In a business presentation, an audience may well be many-faceted. The audience may include someone from human resources, finance, IT, and perhaps the chief executive officer (CEO). How should the presentation be geared to this varied audience?

In a business presentation, an audience may well be many-faceted. The audience may include someone from human resources, finance, IT, and perhaps the chief executive officer (CEO). How should the presentation be geared to this varied audience? It may seem as though only the CEO must be convinced because he makes most of the decisions, but that assumption may be a serious mistake. The influence of others in the audience may have a strong role in the decision-making process. A presenter cannot risk irritating the others in the room by giving them cavalier treatment. If a single presentation is all that is possible, the presentation becomes a composite, not for one audience but for several at once. Knowing what to cover or omit and what to condense or expand to meet the critical needs of most listeners is not easy, but it’s essential.
What is the capability of that audience? Can the audience help achieve the action being asked for in the presentation? Will the influencers and decision makers be part of the audience? If not, there may be a need to redefine the objective of the presentation or rethink the whole approach. Gaining a favorable attitude toward the goal is nonproductive if those in the audience are without the power to implement it.

The audience’s expertise in the subject matter being presented is also key. Beware of using jargon and acronyms that may not be relevant to the everyone in the audience or – even worse – using jargon and acronyms from another industry that have totally different meanings to the audience. “CRM” is one example. To the records manager, it means “certified records manager,” but to sales people, CRM means “customer relations manager.” It is important not to confuse the audience.

Set the presentation at a level the audience can understand. Listeners may not indicate that they don’t have the slightest idea what the presentation is about. Identifying what aspects of the subject might interest the audience is even more difficult to assess than the audience’s knowledge level, but it is more critical to the presentation’s success. Knowing the immediate needs of the organization and its current focus of activity are vital to ensuring the audience’s attention. Failing to be on the audience’s wavelength is what leads to the classic turnoff, “Don’t call us – we’ll call you.”

Develop the Approach and Strategies

A cardinal rule of business presentations is “deliver the message in the allotted time.” Doing so is imperative when the presentation is not the only item on a meeting agenda or on someone’s daily calendar of appointments. Presenters who don’t respect people’s time risk losing the respect of the audience.

During the planning stage:
1. Clarify the time the presentation is scheduled to start and how much time is allocated for it. Reconfirm the schedule prior to the date of the presentation.
2. Determine if the presentation will be the only one of the day and whether there will be time for audience participation and questions. These factors will affect the net time remaining for delivering the message.
3. Determine how much material will be needed to fill the time allotted. It is a waste of time to prepare a message that would take an hour when only 20 minutes are allotted. On the other hand, it would be embarrassing to have only 20 minutes worth of material when an hour is allotted. That’s where practice, as described in the next section, comes in.
4. Consider how the presentation can be condensed or expanded. It’s not unusual for the meeting’s other agenda items to require more or less time than anticipated. A presenter may be asked to lengthen the presentation or shorten it, zeroing in on just the key points.
5. Arrive early on the day of the presentation. Do not take anything for granted because circumstances do not always conform to plan. By arriving early, there is time to ensure that everything is ready for the presentation. The extra time also provides an opportunity to calmly collect thoughts and be better mentally prepared to address the audience. Take a tip from Vince Lombardi, the championship football coach of the Green Bay Packers during the 1960s: “If it’s important enough to show up for, it’s important enough to show up early.”

Planning is an important precursor to presenting. Its numerous benefits can be summed up in this principle: planning prevents poor performance. Planning establishes the presenter’s role and tasks, identifies the characteristics of the audience, determines the nature of the setting, and confirms the presentation’s time frame. Every obstacle that threatens to inhibit the process can be overcome through proper planning.

Practice

There are three rules of successful presentations: Practice. Practice. Practice. Most people feel at least a flutter of nervousness before speaking before an audience. These butterflies in the stomach must be made to fly in formation. Adequate rehearsal will help control nerves much faster.
Just as actors spend weeks rehearsing a play, it’s a good idea to space practice periods over several days, rather than wait for the last few hours before the presentation. The extra time allows the presenter to firmly fix the words and the speech rhythm and provides time to do edit and improve remarks.

Of course, sometimes there is short notice before a presentation. In that case, try to arrange an opportunity to rehearse two or three times over a period of several hours. Most people find that reviewing a presentation at intervals gives better results than concentrating all the rehearsals in one period.

Try to Duplicate

Try to duplicate the presentation’s environment. If the presentation room is unavailable, use a similar room. This provides an opportunity to become familiar with the peculiarities of the room – the lighting, the acoustics, and the placement of the audience.

Because one purpose of rehearsing is to come as close as possible to the conditions of the presentation, try to duplicate the required posture that will be used. If standing at a lectern for the presentation, rehearse by standing at a lectern or table. If the presentation will be given while sitting across a desk or a conference table from the audience, rehearse it that way. It is often a good idea to stand when speaking even if in a boardroom setting. This gives presenters a more commanding air and puts the focus on them. Don’t be afraid to take up a different position in a room if it will give the audience a better visual.

Consider these details during the rehearsal:

• Are the notes arranged so that they can be referred to quickly?
• Are the pages easy to turn?
• If charts or graphs are planned or there is a need to demonstrate something such as a piece of equipment, is it placed within comfortable reach?

To Read or to Memorize?

What’s the best delivery method for a presentation? Reading it to the audience? Speaking from notes or from an outline? Delivering it from memory? All are equally good methods and are simply a means to an end: to make the audience feel like the presenter is speaking directly to them individually. Here are some points to consider for each of these techniques.

• Speaking from a Script

This is both the safest and riskiest way to deliver a presentation. It’s safe because the material is always in front
of the speaker. It’s risky because reading may keep a speaker’s eyes focused on the words and cause a loss of audience contact. To increase the safety and decrease the risk, start rehearsing by reading the presentation aloud several times. Read the presentation for clarity and rhythm. Determine if there are any words that cause a struggle, and change them if they can’t be conquered. Mark up the script with a highlighter for words that need emphasis.

In normal conversation, people vary the speed and the pitch of their voices. People speak faster when excited and louder or softer if angry. When asking a question, a voices rise at the end of the sentence. All of those variations make words more interesting to listeners. In contrast to regular speech, a voice that speaks in an unvarying pattern is monotonous.

Insert pauses after asking a question even if no answer is expected. It gives the audience time to reflect on the thought. Put a short pause at the end of a sentence and a longer one at the end of a paragraph. This helps the audience focus and follow the thinking more quickly. Write the word “pause” right in the script as a reminder.

Speaking from Memory or Notes
This is often the preferred method of speaking and for listening. To many people, a speaker who presents from memory or notes has more credibility because it shows the speaker knows his or her stuff. It is not necessary to memorize the whole presentation, but a professional should be so familiar with the material that all that is needed are a few notes to provide reminders of what to cover. If using a PowerPoint presentation, the slides themselves can be cue cards.

Performance
Robert E. Levinson said in an article in *Dun’s Review*, “In a sense, every executive speechmaker is an actor, giving a performance for the edification, entertainment, and approval of a highly specialized audience. Since the delivery is as important as the content, an executive needs a bit of the ham.”

Following are some basics of stage delivery.

- Perception is everything. A jerk at heart or a presenter who comes across like one will not be saved by all the expensive visual aids in the world.
- Have something worthwhile to say. Charm, general good looks, and a firework display will not impress an audience if substance and facts are missing.
- Practice, practice, practice! This can’t be emphasized enough. Know the subject and the presentation. Don’t walk into the presentation with limited familiarity with the material. It will quickly show.
- Want to be there! Recognize the presentation for the opportunity that it is.
- Be yourself. If a presenter is unprepared, it will cause tight nerves and result in a wooden delivery of the presentation.
- Speak from the heart. From the memoirs of lawyer Louis Nizer comes this advice: “Persuasion does not come from affection or from charm or from wit. It is derived from sincerity. That is why illiterate witnesses or those from humble stations in life, who are awed by the courtroom, may nevertheless be the best witnesses.”
- Believe in yourself and your idea. Project absolute sincerity and confidence in knowing the subject, and the audience will be won over.
- Connect with the audience. Talk with them, not at them.
- Enjoy! When a presenter is doing what he or she likes to do, an audience will respond positively.
- Ham (joking) rarely hurts.

Great presentations are a combination of many things. Malcolm Kushner says in his book *Presentations for Dummies*, “Whether you’re dealing with one person or one thousand, the ability to transmit ideas in a coherent and compelling fashion is one of the most important skills you can ever develop. It’s a basic survival skill, and it always has been.”

**References**


