

The 20 minute course in... making presentations

When presenting to the board, if you can't demonstrate a passionate and positive mindset then no amount of props and PowerPoint will help you



"Storytelling is a thousand times more powerful and memorable than just presenting the hard facts"

Millions of hours are wasted across British workplaces due to droning, self-indulgent presentations. When audiences should be engaged and motivated, they more often than not wind up stifling yawns or tightening their faces in frustration.

Marketers presenting to the board cannot afford a single wasted minute, let alone an hour, particularly in the current climate. Whether they're pitching a new or adapted idea or they're focusing on campaign or product ideas, marketers presenting to seniors, both internally or to an outside client, need to know what works and what doesn't.

Preparation

"The difference between people who pitch successfully to the board and those who don't is a bit like the difference between two equally capable skiers at the top of a steep piste they've never tackled before," says David Hare, trainer for Mancroft International's Winning Edge course. "One of them thinks, 'Blimey, I mustn't hit that tree', while the other says, 'Wow, that's an exciting goal. How much will I enjoy that!' – guess who ends up wrapped round a lonesome pine and guess who makes it to the bottom without even seeing the tree?"

Start with your mindset, Hare concludes. If it isn't positive and passionate, all the behavioural skills and content ideas in the world will be futile – "rather like painting over rust and expecting the corrosion not to show through".

Dos and don'ts

Do ensure all plans outlined in your presentation are fully costed with contingencies and clear, achievable timescales.

Do consider whether your plans are workable for all areas of the business.

Do base as much of your content on evidence as possible, using relevant and up-to-date figures.

Do use humour and back up what you're saying with anecdotes and metaphors wherever possible.

Don't forget to circulate a clear executive summary

Tempting though it can be to use a standard format, a tailored presentation will always go further. Consider your purpose: is it to instruct, inform, influence or inspire? You'll need to plan a different sort of presentation accordingly. John Townsend, author of the Presentations Pocketbook, points out, however, that every good presentation structure has six elements: bang (an attention grabbing hook), introduction, key points, examples, recapping and another bang (closing hook, preferably linked to the first one). As for how much information to provide in advance, consider whether you want to surprise the board or not.

People are likely to remember only three points so form your content into three major areas. "Boards of directors tend to be quite smart, quite numerate and used to making quick decisions – so keep it short, punchy and focused on the deliverable. And whatever you do, don't present incorrect information or numbers – it will totally ruin your credibility," says Kevin McSpadden, managing director of agency More2, whose plans and strategies for the £5m-£7m businesses he works with typically have to be presented to the board.

David Meliveo, marketing director at Autoglass, learned this the hard way. "Due to a system change, I presented an incorrect figure. The chief finance officer automatically spotted the number and started to raise lots of questions for our operations director," he says, "and it created a lot of tension." Taking responsibility for his mistake, however, eventually ironed things out.

But don't shy away from figures, advises Shelagh Register, marketing strategy consultant at Acxiom. "Always present marketing in a financial context – how does the marketing plan relate to business objectives? Be very clear on exactly how different activities will drive profits." Measurement is equally important, she adds. "Be clear on what success will look like and how you'll measure it."

Trial runs are essential, says communications consultant and charity trustee Joanna Biddolph. "We had an opportunity to practice one of our presentations on strangers," she says, "and we noticed shifting eyes and lessening attention spans long before it was over." It was made much shorter and was much better for it.

And be your own devil's advocate, get your sceptic's hat on and imagine every board member thinking, "so what?"

Delivery

The best presentations are active, not passive, so think of your presentation as a conversation rather than a monologue. Maintain eye contact and look for clues as to whether individual board members are engaged. If things are looking ominous, re-energise the room by asking a question. In fact, many communications trainers suggest inviting questions

to board members.

Don't get so caught up in delivery tactics that you forget to feel comfortable – it will show.

Don't keep your eyes on your notes.

Don't worry about being nervous – it's natural.

Don't overrun on a presentation – the board may conclude your planning skills are poor.

Tips from the top

Former marketer **Marc Hogan** is a trainer in communication and influencing skills

Don't stretch things out.

If the board gives you an hour and a half but you need less, tell them. Better to give a 45-minute, focused presentation than a 90-minute repetitive one.

Alternatively, use the extra time to field questions or carry out a relevant exercise.

Match your language to the board's. The language your audience uses on external and internal literature should tell you about their ethos and values. Look for particular words or phrases they use that you could mirror to make your presentation easier for

throughout to encourage audience buy-in and avoid misunderstandings.

“I recently made a suggestion and realised, just as I was about to lose the audience and get a “no”, that their understanding of what I meant was incomplete. I had to add more information, squeezing it in at the last minute,” says Biddolph. “I’d made assumptions – something I tell clients they shouldn’t do – and almost lost my chance.”

Storytelling is essential, according to marketing consultant and trainer Jonathan Gabay. “It is a thousand times more powerful and indeed memorable than just giving hard facts,” he says.

But don’t use too many words – get to the point as quickly as possible. How you use your voice is just as important as what you say, adds John Townsend, who advises presenters to speak louder than usual and to avoid swallowing their words. “Vary tone and pitch,” he says. “Repeat important phrases with different vocal emphases and use delivery speed to manipulate the audience. Use fast delivery to excite and stimulate; slow delivery to emphasise, inspire awe, dramatise and control.”

Think about behaviour and dress. When your body language and appearance is positive people will assume this extends to other aspects of your personality. Psychologists call it the “halo effect”. Amanda Vickers, managing director of Speak First, says presenters should think about body language from the start. “If you want to leave a really positive impression on the board, you need to think about how you’re going to walk in to the room and how you’re going to deliver your first line. We get people on our courses to practice those first few seconds before they open their mouth. Everything about you needs to say, ‘I’m confident; I’m trustworthy’,” says Vickers.

Power failure?

Death by PowerPoint is a big danger area for marketers. While presentations used to be about facts, facts and more facts, today’s best pitches are packed with pizzazz, creativity, stories and examples. What most of us have realised over time (often the hard way) is that even the most information-hungry audiences don’t just need charts, graphs and text – they need engaging and motivating. By all means use PowerPoint to back up what you’re saying, but don’t become a slave to it.

“Avoid PowerPoint if at all possible,” suggests Register. “Instead, vary your presentation media between mood boards, vox pops and where appropriate, mock-ups, samples and models.”

Presentations need theatre, agrees Tony Treacy, managing

them to identify with and understand.

Don’t use graphs and figures if you don’t need to. Some people feel these are vital, but ask yourself if the board will really be interested, or would it be better to provide them in a folder at the end?

Don’t let props divert attention.

The moment you hand out a prop such as a product sample or mock-up, you will lose the attention of some of your audience so give them a few minutes to look at the materials and then ask a question that forces them to re-engage with you.

Teams should present a united front.

Unless a member of your team says something catastrophically wrong don’t correct it – it will make you look as if you don’t know how to communicate well as a team.

director of Ideas to Market. “I won a pitch where all the main messages were on 12 beer cans, which we took out and served to the client, and another where we produced five miniature Chinese soldiers, which represented how the client and its competitors were all saying the same thing. Give the audience a reason to be interested in what you’re saying.” Chartered Institute of Marketing training consultant Lea Raudsepp says she’s amazed that some marketers still show endless text-heavy slides, forgetting that presenting is about getting people to buy into something. “Every single presentation is about a sale of some kind. You just have to work out what sale you’re making.”

Raudsepp points out that people are stimulated by different things. “Some are auditory, others are visual and some like to touch and feel. If you only ever use PowerPoint as your support you’ll lose a big proportion of the room before you even start.”

She adds that PowerPoint means you have to dim the lights – risking instant sleepiness – and you become a distant voice at the back, particularly annoying for auditory folk. Only when you’ve worked out the answers to the question every board member has come along to find out – “what’s in it for me?” – should you decide on technology and props, she says.

Audience anticipation

“With a board you’ll have both executive and non-executive directors,” points out Kevin McSpadden. “The executive directors will not necessarily be experts in marketing. It’s important you explain things in a way they understand and consider how it will affect their teams. For non-executive directors, ensure you understand what their background is and, again, talk to them in their language.”

Several of Lucinda Antal’s board members are academics. “They are used to giving presentations and questioning students,” explains Antal, operations manager at the National Wildflower Centre, “so it’s vital that we provide precise information because they hone in on any waffle.”

Ensure you know the role of every board member and find out their preferences and interests, says Antal. Consider what each person is most likely to want to know more about. That said, focus on the decision makers; their preferences should take precedence.

Teamwork

If you’re presenting as a team, assign roles tightly and appropriately, advises Amanda Vickers. The most capable person, who understands the topic best, should take the lead.

“Get everyone together to brainstorm what you’re going to say and decide on the leader and other roles, such as question

fielder, and who would suit these best,” she suggests. “Get everyone to work on their individual offering and then come back to discuss it and ensure there’s no overlap. Then everyone should go away and refine it and come back to rehearse it as a group.”

If you follow these rules, it works fantastically, Vickers argues – if you don’t, the penalties can be multiple, from someone stealing your thunder to not appearing as a team or looking unprofessional and clumsy.

Are you ready to make your presentation?

1. When presenting you see yourself as:

(a) Nervous and agitated – in fact, you always get out of presenting if you can.

(b) Confident, engaging and memorable.

(c) Good but not great: there’s definitely some room for improvement.

2. When you have an important message to relay at work, you:

(a) Wing it.

(b) Plan what you’re going to say and rehearse how you say it.

(c) Give a little bit more preparation than you might otherwise.

3. When you are communicating with others in a work context, you:

(a) Don’t give it much thought. If you need to say something you get it over with and move on.

(b) Think carefully about whether the way you transmit your message is having the desired effect.

(c) Say what you need to – if they don’t get it, you can always repeat it.

Mostly (a)s

You’re not alone – many marketers view presentations as nothing more than a corporate ritual. But with some basic principles of presenting – identifying the key message and structuring, delivering and supporting it in a way that appeals to your particular audience – you could wow the board and step up a notch on your career ladder.

Mostly (b)s

You're a natural, but thoughtful, communicator. Provided you've got your content right, your presentations could win you many a future deal.

Mostly (c)s

You probably get by in your presentations, but they're hardly show stoppers. Think back to the best presentation you've attended in the past couple of years and think about what made it so good, emulating some of the techniques as a starting point for improving your style.

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