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Improve Your Presentation in Less Than an Hour
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 By Mark Sincevich

As you gaze outside of your window to see the sun peeking out from behind the clouds on what you thought was a predictable day, your boss walks by to let you know that a top prospect is coming by the office in about two hours. You think this is good news for your organization only to hear your boss say, "I would like you to do a 45-minute presentation."

Immediately your heart rate increases, you start to perspire and perhaps your head is spinning. Your meek reply in the affirmative reveals your lack of confidence in your abilities. What if your reply was more akin to, "Sure, I'll be glad to knock our prospect's socks off with a great presentation." What would need to change in your approach in the next two hours for you to deliver a presentation that is your best instead of one that went bust?

Presentations have a way of leaving a legacy long after your program has ended. Even if the prospect doesn't buy from you right now, a high quality presentation will definitely be remembered in a positive light. This might mean referral business down the road. Plus the quality of your presentation will impact how your boss and any other co-workers view you and your abilities. This may affect future assignments of your choice and even your promotion prospects.

Is this enough pressure? Many people in a similar situation take the stress that they are under and pour "gasoline on the fire" as their panic and worries further erupt. While it is important to acknowledge one's feelings of inadequacy, they must quickly be replaced by feelings of positive action. You can worry all you want, but the real question to ask yourself is, "How can I improve the quality of my presentation now?"

We are a society of storytellers. This is in spite of the pressures of instant messaging, cell phones and e-mail. Your audience won't remember the three features about your product or service. They will remember the story you told about a photograph that relates to the three key benefits to them.



In photography there is a concept called the "rule of thirds." The ancient Greeks discovered that all beautiful works of art could be divided into thirds. Showing a photograph of three windmills, one in the left hand plane, one in the center and one in the right hand plane might be the metaphor for your organization's three key benefits to your prospect. One of the windmills can stand for "great relationships."

Change Your Surroundings

At this point, you probably have worried for about 10 minutes. You are now down to an hour and 50 minutes to both prepare your presentation and arrive a little early into the room where you will present. The absolute best thing you can do right now is to get out of your office and change your surroundings. This is a critical first step that most people overlook. Your physical state of being will definitely affect your emotional state. For example, it's hard to come up with new ideas when you are constantly in the same surroundings.

While you are walking, take deep relaxing breaths. Don't forget to take your notebook or a journal and a pen. You'll need these items in a minute or two. It's important to limit your distractions. You need to focus all of your energy and creativity on the task at hand.

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presentation. At the end of the presentation, imagine your prospective inspired enough to take positive action that you have controlled based on your presentation quality. Keep breathing deeply and smile as you look up towards the ceiling. Describe in your notes how you are going to feel, the confident way you will be standing and how the rest of your week will be affected in a positive way.

In photography a picture isn't taken per se, it is actually made. When I make a photograph, I have to anticipate the shot and try to insert myself in the right place at the right time. I visualize how the final photograph is going to look even before I press the shutter. This is why I might wait for an interesting person to walk in front of a bright yellow background.

Develop a Framework

Just as writers develop an outline for an article, story or book, it is critical for you to develop a framework. This framework relates to the sections that you will be presenting to your prospect. Let's say that you now have an hour and 30 minutes to prepare. This is still plenty of time.

I have worked with various types of organizations and have found the following framework works best if you have about 45 minutes to present. You can reduce or increase the amount of time around each section, but spend most of the total time talking about the prospect or getting the prospect to tell you what is important to them. I am going to make an assumption in that you know something about your prospect already.

Introduction about organization: 5 minutes
About the prospect: 10-15 minutes
Optional special segment: 5 minutes
Assurance (past performance): 10-15 minutes
Summary: 3-5 minutes

Simple is Powerful

At this point, resist the temptation to front-load your presentation with your organization's history, how you were acquired, and the fact that your chairman or director is the grand nephew of a former U.S. president. It just doesn't matter. The only thing that is going to ultimately matter in your presentation is how your products or services are of value to your prospect.

Now that you have developed the framework, start filling in the sections.

The first section is the introduction. Start by introducing yourself and anyone else in the room from your organization. This is part of putting people first, because it will be the solid relationships that get the product or service to your prospect and provide for repeat business. Remember the earlier story about great relationships and the windmill? Next you need to talk about your themes and how they are of direct benefit to the prospect. This will get their attention right away.

Let me go back to a metaphor. When the simple shapes like the circle, triangle and square are used in a photograph, the photograph becomes more powerful. This is because it is easy for people to "get it." The primary reason why people are photographed against plain backgrounds is the photographer wants the viewer to be naturally drawn to the person and not be distracted by a cluttered background. The simple photographs are the most powerful ones because the message or messages get through to the viewer easily.

When you have simple messages that are meaningful to your prospects, they "get through" the distractions and are easily remembered. And if you weave them through your program so that they can be repeated appropriately, your prospect will be more inclined to take positive action. Simple messages are the most powerful. An example of a good simple message is great relationships.

Remember It's All About Them

Now that you have successfully planted your key messages, you need to make sure they pass the value check. Many organizations get confused between features and benefits. A computer software company that has knowledgeable technical staff is definitely not a benefit. This is a feature. The benefit or more appropriately the value to your prospect is their software will have the maximum "on" or up time to benefit your prospect's operation. Seeing how bug free the software actually is one way to check this.

Assurance

Now that you've made your value known, how does your prospect know that you can deliver? On a recent prospect appointment, I met with an executive from the construction industry. He asked if I had worked with any other construction companies in the past improving the presentation skills of their executives.

While it might have been helpful to show a portfolio of work from the construction industry, what he really wanted was the assurance that I am capable and competent to do the work with stellar results. This means being familiar with the type of people in his industry and their buzzwords.

I mentioned my work with executives in the architectural field. This is a related industry and one that is integral to the work performed in construction. I went on to say it is more important to bring diverse ideas from outside of the industry. New ideas will allow for innovative thinking and improved results. However, if you do have specific industry experience, then it is appropriate to bring it up in this section, too.

Weave Your Messages

As you develop your program, keep coming up with ways to weave your key messages into your presentation. If you are planning on assigning a project manager to your prospect, then one of your key themes for the presentation ought to be "great relationships."

You would have introduced the concept by introducing your people first. If you were a bit cleverer, you would have told a story around the value your organization places on relationships. Since you know your prospect, you would want to show how they value great relationships, too. In the assurance section, you would want to make reference to other clients where great relationships were critical to the success of your joint operation.

Do you see how the appropriate placement of your key messages helps to control what your prospect is going to remember? The way to tie a ribbon around your weave of key messages is to tell a story that directly relates to your message of "great relationships."

Create a Powerful Close

I am always amazed at how much time individuals spend on crafting the beginning of their presentations. Typically it's always about them to boot! It's important to spend sufficient time to create a powerful ending that relates to your prospect. When I mentioned the importance of stories in our society, I touched upon the importance of simple, yet powerful communications. While you might not have remembered this exact wording, I'll bet you remembered the concept of simple photographs with triangles, circles and squares are the most powerful.

Let me go back to a key message of great relationships. Can you think of a story in your organization or in your profession that depended upon great relationships? Expand your field of view even further and look at your previous experience. Maybe you were in the military and you know the high value placed on relationships by your fellow soldiers.

My grandfather was a sergeant in World War I during the Second Battle of the Marne in 1918. His position was overrun at one point and he was wounded. He used his survival skills to hide under the debris around him. He pretended to be dead as bayonets poked frighteningly close. After the enemy passed, he slowly got up and found a buddy from his unit who couldn't walk.

My grandfather limped back to friendly lines over two miles away while carrying a wounded comrade on his shoulders. For his heroism he was awarded the Purple Heart. Clearly the military values great relationships. If you had this kind of story, can you see how powerful it can be? It is more powerful if it directly relates to the value or key messages that you introduced in the beginning.

Now that you have a powerful ending story and a solid framework, go back and craft a good opening story. A good opening story is designed to get the audience's attention and to hold their interest. A good opening story about great relationships might relate to your organization's emphasis on giving employees the time to have outside professional interests in groups or associations. Mention the key relationships that are developed in these places and how they increase the connection your organization has to the community. Give a specific example.

Take Another Walk

Congratulations are in order. You were able to create a great presentation in about an hour. Since you have about 30 minutes remaining, you better get back to your office and into the conference room early. However, the last thing you want to do know is to hurry. Walk confidently back to your office and visualize how impressive your presentation is going to be. Keep breathing deeply and relax.

At one client, I had finished a three-hour information-gathering meeting only to be asked unexpectedly to speak for about 15 minutes to the entire office of 80 people. The principals of the firm wanted me to present a roadmap of program we were going to be implementing. I didn't want to go directly from one meeting to another, so I went outdoors. I told the principals of the firm that I needed a few minutes to prepare.

This involved me heading out of the office to take a walk around the block for 10 minutes or so. During this time I practiced deep breathing and had my camera with me. I was able to take a very interesting photograph of Georgetown in the early evening. Doing something completely different for a few minutes helped me to reset my mind and provided an effective transition to the next task.

Present with Power

Another deep breath...and...ahhh, you're on! You have your notes to the side in case you lose track of your place. Since you have a framework, you don't have to follow a script or notes written too small for you to read. The only things to remember are your three key messages.

These messages are the value that your organization brings to your prospect. It is the glue that holds your presentation together and will be the items that you prospect is likely to remember especially when you match your messages with appropriate stories. At the end of the day, we enjoy listening to and telling stories. When you change your surroundings, visualize your success, create an effective framework and weave key messages into your presentation alongside of appropriate stories, the great relationships you are showing to be of immense value will shine through.

Mark Sincevich works with people and organizations to increase their communication power through a unique photography angle. He is the founder and chief perspective officer of Staash Press and the creator of the Staash Perspective System, which teaches that simplicity leads to more powerful communication. Sincevich also is the executive director of the Digital Photography Institute. Contact him at (301) 654-3010 or at www.staashpress.com.

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