

## GUIDE TO PRESENTATION SKILLS

The key to a quality presentation is understanding that *how* one presents affects the audience's perceptions of *what* one presents. The most insightful, compelling or articulate presentation becomes dull, unconvincing or confused when delivered poorly. In the oft-quoted line from his book *Understanding Media; The Extensions of Man* Marshall McLuhan argued that "the medium is the message." In terms of presentations, if the medium (the presenter) is ill-prepared, unskilled or ill-at-ease, the "message" will be perceived in an equally poor light. In this course, you will have opportunities to work on presentation skills. Because good presentation skills will serve you well during your entire career, the more practice you can have in the relatively unthreatening environment of this course, the better prepared you are likely to be for future presentations. The guidelines presented in this handout should assist you in delivering presentations in all of your classes. It is important to note, however, that professors vary in terms of the specifics they look for in presentations. Before preparing a presentation make sure that you are clear on the specific professor's expectations. The following seven sections detail key elements of a professional presentation with emphasis on the expectations for this course. They are arranged in the order that you are likely to do them rather than in order of importance. Depending on the setting, these topics may vary in their degree of importance; however, they will always be crucial issues.

### Argument and Analysis

This is the first concern in any professional presentation. In most cases, presentations represent a particular point of view i.e. an argument. This argument is based in logic developed from an analysis of the problem or issue. There are several ingredients to a good argument. First, it must be comprehensive in coverage while providing sufficient depth. Because most presentations are time-limited, balancing breadth and depth of coverage is often a tough choice. To help address this dilemma, any information you can gain as to what specifics the audience members expect will be helpful.

Second all "facts" must be accurate. While it would seem that this would "go without saying," it is amazing how often students will make factual errors - even when working with written cases. Double and if necessary, triple-check any facts you use in your argument. Making factual errors will cost you points in a classroom presentation - later it may cost you your job.

Third, all assumptions should be reasonable and defensible. Almost all presentations require assumptions. Depending on the course area you may need to make assumptions about costs of capital, required rates of return, future market shares, interest rates etc. Be prepared to explain the assumptions you made and why you made them. This explanation should be concise and in language that everyone in the room can understand. Because of time constraints, you may need to explain assumptions briefly and mention that further information will be available in the question and answer period. (See the section entitled "Ability to Answer Questions" for more ideas on this topic.)

Next, there should be a flow from analysis to conclusions to recommendations. This is especially salient for group presentations but applies to any kind. It is helpful to begin the talk with an agenda or outline of the presentation that shows how various sections are linked. Introductions that begin each sub-section plus internal (concluding) summaries that tie back to the original outline will help keep the audience on track with the presenter. (See the section entitled "Transitions" for more ideas on this topic.)

Finally, developing a good argument does not mean being argumentative. The art of persuasion lies not in badgering or overwhelming your audience but in allowing the brilliance of your insights and logic to shine through. The most effective presentations are ones where

the facts, analyses and recommendations are in themselves compelling. The goal is to have the message speak for itself because the speaker has gotten out of the way.

## Transitions

A critical element in the presentation is its "flow" and the attendant issue of transitions. The issue of transitions is important both for the individual presentation and for the group presentation. For the individual presenter, the issue concerns transitions between elements of the presentation. As mentioned previously, an overall introduction, introductions to specific sections, internal summary conclusions and an overall conclusion section will help maintain a flow through the presentation. Without transitions, the audience will be distracted trying to figure out what is going on and/or where a presenter is in the talk. With internal transitions, the audience can concentrate on the message rather than the medium.

For group presentations, the content transitions mentioned above are also important. For groups, there is the second issue of transitions between presenters. Changing speakers can be very distracting for an audience given the wide variety of speaking styles. By having each group member follow the same guidelines as mentioned above (e.g. an overall introduction, introductions to specific sections, internal summary conclusions and an overall conclusion section) while adding a preview of the next speaker's material, the disruption from switching speakers can be minimized.

## Graphics

Your argument and analysis can be enhanced greatly with the proper use of graphics. Tables, figures and pictures can be very effective tools for the presenter if they are used correctly. With the advent of a wide variety of graphics software, the era of sloppy graphics is over. Desk-top publishing software allows virtually anyone with access to a computer to put together striking overheads and slides. It should be noted that "striking" does not necessarily mean effective when it comes to graphics. A good graphic will be clear and uncluttered. It will be used as a summary of material rather than a display of all relevant information. It will be easily readable from the farthest point in the room where the presentation will be made. Lines, bars, wedges etc. will be constructed (e.g. using proper colors or patterns) so that they can be distinguished from one another. There will be no "typos" on a good graphic. Graphics taken or adapted from other people's work will be so cited. Handwritten graphics are virtually never acceptable.

The issue of graphics handling is also an important one to consider. The two "handling" issues are how you get the transparencies or slides up and what you do with them after they are up. If you are working with photographic slides, then it is imperative that you check that they are in order and right-side-up. For transparencies, one should enter the presentation room with the slides separated from any backing material and be sure they are in proper order (preferably numbered and in a frame so they are easy to handle). For electronic slides, be sure the equipment is working and that the level of light in the room is sufficiently low so that the slides can be seen.

While few people would stand in front of their projector while displaying a slide, many people will talk to the graphic and not the audience. If using a pointer with transparencies, use one on the projector so that you can face the audience. If you have to use a pointer to the screen, spend as little time as is possible with your back to the audience. Point out the feature of interest and return to facing the audience. Make sure that all graphics are displayed straight.

One hint for group presentations using transparencies is to have one or more person put the slides up as the presenter talks. This way the presenter can concentrate on talking as opposed

to worrying about whether the transparency is straight. Groups can either appoint one transparency handler or each presenter can take a turn.

### Ability to Answer Questions

Once you have developed your analysis, argument and graphics, your attention should next turn to the question and answer period that is likely to follow the formal presentation. The question and answer period can be the most important part of a presentation. During this portion of the presentation, the audience can delve into the specifics of the ideas under discussion and probe the extent to which the presenter understands the issues at hand. As such, it is necessary to prepare this section of the presentation as extensively as you prepare the formal portion. Preparation for the question and answer section entails thinking about all of the issues you do not discuss during the formal presentation and any other possible questions you think might come up. For individual presentations, have a friend or classmate listen to your presentation and then "brainstorm" any issues that may come up. For a group presentation, the group collectively should "brainstorm" possible questions. Be especially attuned to any assumptions underlying analyses and be prepared to justify them. One way to organize the examination of assumptions is to review each graphic and determine the assumptions that underlie it.

The most critical issue in the question and answer period is being sure that you answer the question the audience member has asked. There are several reasons why the audience member's question might not be clear. Lack of clarity may stem from the arcane nature of the question to an audience member's intentional obfuscation of their intent. Regardless of why the question is unclear, it is up to the presenter to answer it. If you have the slightest doubt as to the meaning of the question, ask! There are two general ways to ask for clarification. First, you can paraphrase the question back to the audience member saying something like "Let me make sure that I understand your question, do you mean . . . ." This is a technique called active listening and is preferable. By paraphrasing the question back to the audience member, the presenter communicates that he or she is listening and has an interest in making sure the audience member's question is answered. Alternatively, if you have no idea what the question means, then it is appropriate to request a rephrasing by the audience member. Use this second approach as sparingly as is possible because it may be interpreted as resistance or defensiveness. If you have the smallest clue as to the questioner's intent, the paraphrase technique will be better.

Finally, do not be afraid to say "I don't know - I will have to get back to you." You can not anticipate all possible questions. It should be obvious that, in general, saying "I don't know" is not good and should be done only when necessary. However, trying to waffle your way out of a question when you do not know the answer may hurt you far more than an admission of ignorance.

In a group presentation, there are is an additional issue related to answering questions. The organization of the question and answer period is critical. With several presenters fielding questions, it is quite possible that the question and answer period will degrade into a mob scene where presenters interrupt each other to make sure that the question is answered correctly. One good way to organize a group of presenters for a question and answer period is to have a moderator who takes the questions and identified specialists for given areas e.g. one person answers financial questions, one person answers marketing questions etc. In addition, group members should make a vow to augment another presenter's answer only if absolutely essential or if asked to do so.

## Appearance

With your presentation developed, your thoughts can now turn to the rest of the picture i.e. the appearance of the group. There are two clichés that apply to the issue of appearance in presentations. The first is Billy Crystal's "looking good is better than feeling good" and the second comes from the commercial whose tag-line was "never let them see you sweat." These clichés do not imply that presentation success rides on the label in your suit. Wearing clothes by Armani or Donna Karan won't improve your message. Rather, since how you look is part of the McLuhan "medium" mentioned above, paying attention to appearance is part of the package. First, when in doubt use professional dress. The specifics of your choice are dictated by the setting and its norms. Not everyone needs a blue suit. There are several guides available for you to consult e.g. *Dress for Success*. The point is not the degree to which you match the guidebook's suggestion, but rather how you make the most of what you have. Attending a presentation in an anxious state, disheveled or dressed inappropriately (whatever that means) distracts from your message.

Again, there is a separate issue for group presentations. Every member of a group can look as if they just stepped off the pages of GQ or "Women's Wear Daily", and still not present a good appearance. If the other members of the group are not listening to the presenter, talking to each other, doing crossword puzzles or in some way distracted, they also detract from the "appearance" of the group.

## Ease and Energy of the Presentation

This section of this guide discusses the actual process of presenting. There are several key elements to the process but this section focuses on seven. First and foremost, there is the level of energy with which the speaker presents. The energy level in a presentation becomes apparent in two ways. The presenter's energy manifests in variations in tone and inflection that the speaker includes. The goal in a presentation is to convince the audience. If you have put the audience to sleep by speaking for 30 minutes in a monotone, your chances of success are small. Alternatively, if you vary your speed, tone etc. during the talk, the audience has a better chance of staying awake and you have a better chance of getting your point across.

A related "energy" issue is enthusiasm. While no one has to be a "tub-thumper" to get his or her message across, if you do not have enthusiasm for what you are saying, then it is likely that the audience won't either. If you as the "medium" send an unenthusiastic "message" then that is how the message will be received.

There is also the issue of movement. I am sure you have seen faculty who wander all over the room when presenting a lecture and have also seen people who never leave their podium. The question of which is correct is mainly a function of personal style. However, it is important to remember that anything that distracts from a presentation reduces the presentation's chances of success. As such, you should probably limit movement without appearing trapped.

Also of interest is the "smoothness" of the presentation. This element of the process concerns the degree to which the presenter delivers the materials without interruptions or pauses. The two issues underlying "smoothness" are the presenter's degree of preparation and how the presenter delivers the material. As with any skill, presentational proficiency requires practice, practice and more practice! The best way to develop a smooth presentation style is to be so familiar with the material that presenting it is similar to reciting your name. The keys are to practice presenting and to practice each specific presentation as much as you can.

Familiarity does not mean memorization. All effective speakers use notes. The degree to which the speaker depends on the notes is a function of preparation and skill level. The

question arises, however as to whether you should read the presentation verbatim or work just from notes. The answer to this question depends on the skill and comfort level of the presenter. Remembering that the best presenter is the one whose style does not distract from the presentation, the "notes versus reading" question is easily settled. While an extemporaneous presentation with limited use of notes probably is best overall, the best method for you is the one that produces the smoothest result. If at first that means you need to read your presentation, then by all means do so. As you become more comfortable with the process, you will be able to rely more on notes and your own facility with both your material and the presentation process.

We now turn our attention to contact with the audience. The professional presentation is first and foremost an effort at communication. Because communication is a personal thing, a good presenter will engage the audience as much as is possible. The key element to engaging the audience is eye-contact. The best strategy seems to be to look directly at as many members of the audience as possible. Looking at audience members does not mean a protracted stare, but rather a 2-5 second look in their eyes to try to make some modest connection. Try not to rush around in your looks at the audience; rather slowly move your eyes about the audience and connect with as many members of the audience as are possible. It is important to note that this level of eye contact is a uniquely American phenomenon. In other cultures, this level of eye contact would be considered offensive. Before applying these techniques, consider the culture within which you are operating.

The last issue in this section is the use of "mental commas." "Mental commas" are the "ums", "uhs", "you knows" and "rights" placed during a sentence or at its end for emphasis. The best strategy is to limit or avoid their use. Part of the use of these items is habit - one that can be broken with attention. Research data suggest that we use these "mental commas" like a punctuation comma; to give us a moment to find the right word. Again the key to preventing the use of these "mental commas" is preparation. The more prepared you are, the less likely you are to use "mental commas."

### Overall Impression

The last portion of this guide addresses the "whole" that the talk presents. Going back to McLuhan for a moment, if the "medium is the message" then what you are trying to do in a presentation is to convey a complete picture. A good overall impression will convince the audience of the points the presenter(s) was(were) trying to make. To gauge your overall impression, during your practice sessions, ask several questions including (but not limited to):

Is the material convincing?

Is the presentation comprehensive and does it provide sufficient depth?

Am I well prepared and am I being professional?

Do I take the presentation seriously?

The presentation is a "whole" message. The degree to which you can answer the previous questions "yes" will dictate the success of the presentation.

In closing, good presentation skills will be among your most important assets both in this course and in your career. The previous sections describe general issues in presentation success. The specific applications of these guidelines to your speaking style is up to you. It should be noted that presentation skills are likely to become even more important in the future than they have been up to this point. As business becomes more complex, organizations are developing a wider variety of strategic options to address the complexity. Often times these new strategic options entail joint ventures, strategic alliances, cross functional teams etc. Each of these new strategic options entail presentations to what are often disparate groups. Success

**in the business world of the future often will hinge on you and your firm's ability to get your ideas across through presentations. Take advantage of the opportunities that this course provides that will help you develop your presentation skills.**