

Presentation Skills for Program and Project Managers

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We always appreciate a good presentation! There is a good deal of excellent material and advice on presentation skills available, and we are not trying to cover every aspect in this article.

In this article, we are working from the premise that there are two main goals of a presentation, regardless of the situation or topic:

- 1) Providing information or education about a product, service, opportunity, project, or something else.
- 2) Attempting to influence the audience in some way (e.g. to make a decision about a topic, to purchase a product or service, etc.).

A presentation can take a passive or an active form:

1. **Passive** means it is not “directly” in front of you – for example, you read something in the newspaper or on a website, you listen to a debate on the radio, or you watch a program on television. You are reading and/or listening or watching but you are not directly engaged one-on-one with, or in the presence of, the presenter. You can choose to switch off (or change channels on) your television, radio, or PC or stop reading an author’s argument at any time without any “pressure” to provide a reason why. Passive presentations need to quickly attract your attention and interest, and to maintain it so that, at some point, you see, hear or read enough to react to the message– for example, by deciding to purchase a product or making a decision to sign up for something mentioned in the presentation. Different presentations can take different forms. For example, many commercially-orientated presentations that focus on materialistic goods often try to be entertaining and witty or amusing. The American Football Super Bowl commercials have a long-established reputation for this; the same is arguably true of commercials screened at any major sporting event around the world that attracts a large audience of viewers. (For example, the Rugby World Cup has humorous advertisements sprinkled between the games and at breaks such as half-time)
2. **Active** means you see the presenter live, either in a room or auditorium or perhaps through a virtual connection in a “direct” way (as opposed to, say, joining an anonymous podcast). During such presentations, it is not easy to leave inconspicuously without being perceived as rude, so you have to listen to and/or watch the presentation. Most likely, you will need to make a decision, express an opinion, or make a change based upon the presentation conclusion that is postulated by the presenter.

So, let’s focus now on you as the presenter. Regardless of your situation and audience, you will be challenged with effectively presenting information that ensures the clarity of your points, ensuring that your audience understands your message, and seeking a response from them that will achieve your goal. In a “passive” presentation, you strive to have your audience consume the presentation (whether reading, watching or listening) and come away with the intended result (for example, to be informed about your project). In an “active” presentation, your audience will be judging your presentation skills, your speaking capabilities and your ‘performance’. Although you can’t coerce people’s thoughts or opinions, there are certain skills necessary for effective presentations that we hope will provide you with some confidence in your presentation delivery and your ability to successfully convey your message. We are not professional speakers; however, we do have a reasonable amount of experience in presenting to different audiences and we would like to offer what we hope are some helpful tips that you can take on board.

Let’s look at these three areas:

1. You,
2. Your presentation, and

3. Where you will be presenting

All three factors can and will influence “the presentation experience” for your audience. Whether you are a “polished” and experienced speaker or you are a novice, here are some suggestions that can optimize your chances of a good outcome.

You

- Review your material thoroughly – “know it” fluently and be confident as to how to deliver it.
- Ensure you are dressed and groomed in the manner appropriate to the presentation.
- When you speak, speak clearly; try speaking more slowly than usual, and keep to the point.
- Use pauses between sentences – they can be effective.
- Be animated and upbeat versus stoic and boring.
- Consider moving around as you present; use your hands to create emphasis.
- Use humour only if it is appropriate. (Remember that humour differs across the world, so pay attention to the cultures of the people in your audience.)
- Practice and ‘time’ the presentation to be certain that it fits the schedule – don’t run out of time.
- If a mistake is found in your presentation, acknowledge it and move smoothly on.
- When you get a question from the audience, clarify the question and repeat it for the others.
- If you don’t know the answer, say so.
- Ask a colleague to take notes for you for tracking any questions and follow-up items.
- Be culturally sensitive in your presentation - tailor it to the audience.

The Presentation

- Explain to your audience at the start what you hope to achieve from your presentation.
- Summarize up front and conclude at the end. (Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.)
- Make your main points up front and support them in the conclusion of the presentation.
- Make your points in order of importance –descending order usually works well.
- If you are using slides, be consistent in the information mapping and slide layout.
- Keep the amount of text on slides to a minimum.
- If you are using slides, do not turn away from your audience and read from them.
- Spell check the presentation.
- Although video can be appropriate, keep animation to a minimum.
- Consider the use of simple “props” if they will help to make a point (e.g., to enhance visualisation).
- Try to anticipate questions and include that information where applicable.
- Use data (#,%, \$) when you can and provide the reasons “why”.
- If any information is confidential, make that clear.
- Consider ways to encourage audience participation if appropriate – e.g., sprinkling questions and short “surveys” throughout your presentation that will give people the opportunity to express their opinions.
- Don’t forget to ask for questions at the end.
- If you are presenting external to your organization, obtain proper internal reviews prior to your presentation.

The Environment

- Check the presentation venue (room, lecture theatre, etc.) ahead of time to ensure proper seating and that the speaker system and projector works. (If you cannot inspect it, ask for some photos.)
- Arrive early and acknowledge people as they enter the room.
- If you are using collaborative tools (e.g., websites or videos), have them ready early to ensure everything is working properly.
- Have a back-up of any key information in an offline format, just in case you cannot access the online information when you need it (i.e., be prepared!).

- Have copies of your presentation available or send them to attendees ahead of time, if appropriate.
- If you can, have questions sent to you in advance so you can answer or even them include in the presentation backup.

To those more experienced presenters reading this article, most of these suggestions are nothing new, but to those newer presenters, we hope these tips can make a difference in your presentation.

In summary, whether you are experienced or not, presentations are always a challenge. You can never guarantee your audience's reaction, but you can take some measures to ensure a more positive outcome to your presentation.