

Effective Presentation Skills: Tips for the Conference

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Presenting a paper at a conference provides an excellent opportunity to market your knowledge and raise your profile in the area of your expertise. To gain maximum advantage of this opportunity it is essential that the presentation be effective. This requires planning. An excellent speaker does not rely on heuristic short cuts.

The stages of needs analysis, design and delivery of a paper at a conference tend to be overlooked. Professional presentations run the risk of providing too much detail and therefore technically overloading the memory retention levels of the audience. Common mistakes made in public speaking include reading word for word from scripts, speaking in a monotonous voice filled with 'ums and ahs', muttering, the shuffling of paper which is amplified by the microphone and the inability to effectively use visual equipment which results in 'hampering' not 'enhancing' levels of communication. Conference presentations tend to place great emphasis on the content of the speech but the message is often lost because a number of fundamental skills for effective presentations are disregarded. Being an authority on the subject is not the only essential criterion. Planning, preparation and practice are vital.

Analysis

During the analysis stage, the presenter should collect data to determine the audience's interest, level of expertise and obtain a rough estimate of the size of the group. These factors along with information about the time, venue, access to training equipment, length of speech and information about other papers being presented will affect the design of the presentation.

Design

In the design stage, the aim and specific objectives of the presentation must be formulated to reflect the content of the speech. The content should contain information that the audience 'must know' and 'should know' about the subject. If time permits the 'nice to know' incidental information can be included or presented in a handout. The speech should be structured with an introduction, body and conclusion. The introduction announces the topic, the body provides explanations about the specific points of the objectives structured in sequential steps, and the conclusion summarises the content by referring back to the objectives. After writing the speech out in full, the information then should be grouped into key points, recorded on cards to assist your memory, and then practised so that it may be articulated in a conversational tone.

Research shows that people only remember 20% of what they hear and between 50% and 80% of what they hear and see¹. This means that the presenter should combine some form of visual aid to increase levels of retention. Taking into consideration the primacy and recency effect, that people only remember the beginning and end of speeches, visual aids would be better utilised during the body of the speech.

There are many types of visual aids available. If the presenter is delivering a speech to a large audience, the overhead projector is an effective tool, however it is important to keep in mind that the audience seated in the back half of a large room or auditorium may have difficulties viewing the information. To overcome this problem, prepared handouts should be distributed at the same time this information appears on the screen. The information on the screen should also be visually pleasing to the eye. Avoid lengthy sentences, written in capital letters, complex diagrams and the annoying habit of flashing on or off the equipment before the audience has time to read the information. Check with the audience first before turning off the equipment. If visual aids interfere with the communication process then they should not be used.

Lengthy speeches should be broken into segments to enhance retention levels, by the use of visual equipment, inviting questions from the audience, referring to sections in the distributed handouts or simply allocating a five minute stretch break.

Enthusiastic presenters may wish to incorporate strategies to meet the learning needs of their audience. David Kolb's four learning styles theory indicates that people relate to information on different levels². The 'theorist' needs to be provided with background written material; the 'activist' with activities, for example the scope to ask questions; the 'pragmatist' needs to see the link between the subject and real life issues; and the 'reflector' requires scope to think over the issues before responding. Food for thought.

Preliminary preparation

Prior to the delivery of the presentation, it is necessary to practice your speech perhaps in front of a mirror or a trusted colleague, familiarise yourself with both the venue and use of equipment, for example the microphone, and decide in advance what clothing to wear. Do not wear clothing which will restrict your movements or your breathing. It is important to feel comfortable in your clothing as this could affect your delivery.

Delivery

On the day of the presentation arrive a little earlier so that there is plenty of time to check that the equipment is in good working order. Ensure that you have plenty of room to move about on the platform and that there are no obstacles like cords from the equipment placed in areas where you may trip.

1 Pike, Robert W *Creative Training Techniques Handbook*. Minneapolis: Lakewood Books, 1994
2 Kolb, David *Learning Style Inventory: Technical Manual*. Boston: McBer Publishing Co., 1976

During initial delivery stage establish a rapport with your audience, act confident even if you are nervous and make good eye contact. Don't forget to smile, show your enthusiasm, be aware of your body movements and avoid any irritating behaviour. Raise your voice a little higher in the initial stage to capture the audience's attention and to maintain their interest. Project your voice towards the audience. If you speak with your head down while looking at your notes or while facing the whiteboard or overhead projector the impact of the delivery will be impaired.

It is also necessary to vary the pitch and pace of your voice. If you speak at the same monotonous level your audience will surely lose concentration. To achieve optimum volume and strength voice levels you do not need to shout. The quality of your tone is affected by poor posture and speaking through a half open mouth as well as resisting your breathing capacity. Be conscious of your posture, stand erect, open your mouth and pronounce words clearly, talk in a conversational tone and use natural body language, for example movement of your arms, to explain a concept. The best way to communicate is to talk 'to' your audience and not 'at' them.

In summary, an effective speaker is one who thoroughly prepares their presentation, practises, presents and then evaluates their performance with the aim of continually seeking better ways of communicating information. Seeking feedback on your performance, attending training courses in public speaking and the use of visual equipment will enhance your presentation skills.

More on Internet Access at Parliament...

Senator Alston (Victoria - Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [complaining about the lack of individual access by Parliamentarians to the Internet] "I will refer to something that was posted on the Internet by an ANU subscriber - 'I can listen to Bill Clinton's voice, but not Keating. I can hear Bill Clinton's cat, Socks, miaow. Worse, you can send Socks messages on the Internet, but not the Prime Minister of Australia. I can e-mail a cat, but not a single member of the government or the opposition or my local member.' "

(Extract from Senate Hansard Wednesday, 22 March 1995, p 1897).