

Presentation Skills - Preparation

Once you get your mindset on the right track, you must turn your focus toward preparing for your presentation. There are many factors that go into your preparation. Obviously, you must have your message prepared, but there are many other things to consider as well. For example, you have to know as much as you possibly can about the people who will comprise your audience. You must uncover what their interests and expectations are. You must also take into consideration where you'll be speaking, what time of day it will be and what logistical and technical considerations may play a role. Perhaps most important of all, you must know the members of your audience as intimately as possible. Your whole objective is to effectively and successfully get a specific point across to them. Hence, you must first understand to whom it is you're presenting and where they're at, philosophically, in relation to your point. The more information you have at your disposal, the more effective your persuasive attempts will be. Consider the following list of questions when striving to learn more about your audience:

1. What is their common background or interest that brings them together to hear you speak?
2. Who are these people as individuals (business professionals, students, mothers, etc.)?
3. Will your audience tend to be more one gender than the other, or will they be pretty equally mixed?
4. Do you need to be aware of their political, religious, professional or other associations?
5. What will their average education and/or income level be?
6. What topic can you speak about that they will universally care about and understand?
7. What types of things would they be looking to get out of your message?
8. In terms of your key point(s), are they likely to agree, disagree or be indifferent?
9. What is their general age range?
10. Will they tend to be more conservative or liberal in their life views?
11. Is this likely to be an easygoing or more demanding type of crowd?

12. How long will you be likely to keep them engaged? How much time is even permissible?

These types of questions will allow you to customize your presentation to your audience. Obviously, you will not present to a board of college professors in the same way you would address a group of inner-city youth. After you've discovered all that you can about your audience, you begin to tailor and customize your message and decide exactly how to present it. This process is a simple formula, really: discover, design and deliver. So, once you know all there is to know about your audience, you must then figure out how to organize your presentation in the most appropriate fashion. Again, when doing so, there is plenty to consider. Think about the following ideas when you are in the "structure and design" mode of your persuasive message:

1. How much time is allotted for you to speak?
2. What will the setting be (auditorium, office, classroom, etc.)?
3. How large will your audience be?
4. Will you be speaking from a platform in front of a microphone, or will you be sitting in an intimate circle?
5. What time of day will it be? Will your audience be tired, refreshed, hungry, preoccupied, etc.? Should you/can you consider scheduling a break in your presentation?
6. Will there be any possible distractions that you can avoid by knowing about them in advance? For example, noise from neighboring rooms, outside distractions, children, traffic volume as people move from one room to another, sunlight producing too much glare, etc.
7. Can you inspect the presentation venue ahead of time? Where will you present from and what will your audience's seating situation be?
8. What equipment will be accessible, if needed, like an overhead projector, a portable microphone, a flip chart, a blackboard or a dry erase board (along with chalk or markers), etc.?

9. What kind of sound system will be used, if any? Can you come to the venue early to do a sound check and familiarize yourself with the equipment?

Another crucial part of the “design” phase in the discover–design–deliver formula is the crafting of your actual message. What is a good outline for the message itself? The first area of concern is your opening. How do you grab your audience’s interest within the first fifteen to thirty seconds? In this brief window of opportunity, you must also introduce your topic. In other words, what is the issue being discussed?

Once you’ve engaged your audience’s attention with a solid opener, the body of your presentation becomes the next most important phase. It should provide relevant information and provoke discussion (if appropriate) about the issue at hand. In so doing, it should progressively lead up to your solution or key point. After you’ve stressed your key point or presented your solution—whichever format is most appropriate to the situation—you then conclude your presentation by summarizing the key points. Finally, you clearly and *concisely* issue your audience a “call to action.” In other words, what exactly are you telling them to do once they walk away from your talk? Your call to action should be straightforward, easy to remember and easy to carry out. When issuing it, you must empower your audience to want to do exactly what it is you want them to do. Confidence and conviction during your call to action is a critical persuasive component. The effectiveness of your call to action is all about how the audience perceives you. Because it is such a crucial component, I would suggest that you write your call to action before beginning any other phase of your presentation. When doing so, ask yourself what exactly it is you want your audience to do upon completion of your presentation and then build your presentation around the answer.

I recommend sticking closely to this outline, or a similar variation, when preparing for any persuasive speech. You must keep your presentation cohesive and easy to follow. Experts say that you forget 80 percent of everything you’ve heard within twenty-four hours of hearing it. With odds like that stacked against you, you really can’t afford for your presentation *not* to be cohesive and easy to follow. To make your presentation even

more effective, consider stressing a main theme and then reiterating it via three to five main points throughout your presentation. The human mind loves theme and repetition. Of course, I'm not saying you should be redundant. For variety, you can underscore key points in different ways, but all the spokes of your "wheel of evidence" should point back to the same hub. Repetition increases awareness, attention and comprehension.

Do you remember the infamous OJ Simpson trial? The thing we will all always remember about that courtroom drama is the line, "If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit." With that simple repeated phrase, defense attorney Johnnie Cochran created an unforgettable line that he knew would lock itself in the jury members' minds. Gerry Spence, a commentator during the OJ trial who is widely heralded as "America's Finest Trial Lawyer," has never lost a case. One of the reasons he has maintained a flawless record is because he always presents a crystal-clear theme that he knows will resonate with his audience. One of his most famous cases involved the defense of a bankrupt family-owned ice cream business in a suit against McDonald's over breach of an oral contract. His theme? "Let's put honor back in the handshake." In their defenses, Cochran and Spence were both on to the same winning technique: A common and memorable theme that is backed by supporting material and that is organized into three to five main points is a surefire strategy for getting your message across clearly, easily and easier to remember.

You will feel more confident in yourself and your message when you find ways to rehearse and practice your speaking before you actually get in front of an audience. When you know your introduction like the back of your hand, you develop more confidence. When you are prepared, the fear of the public-speaking situation erodes away. If you want to dazzle your audience, make your topic dance in front of them. I believe there is no such thing as a boring topic; there are only boring speakers. Here are some ways to increase your confidence and your ability to present with power.

- ❑ Practice in front of a mirror.
- ❑ Get familiar with the location where you will be speaking.

- ❑ Videotape yourself and watch for ways to improve.
- ❑ Test all your stories and jokes on a neutral audience.
- ❑ Visualize your success before the presentation.

© 2009 Kurt Mortensen