

Eight Time-Proven Presentation Tips

Violate at Your Own Risk

DANIEL KNAPP

“I know this is an eye chart so I will just run through it quickly.” Eddie realized he repeated those words for at least the second time. The audience stirred restlessly. Some appeared to doodle or look ahead in the stack of inch-deep slides; one nodded into slumber. Eddie squinted at the overhead projection with its small print. He couldn’t read it from five feet away. Eddie fought to save his project funding but lost his audience to a mental holiday. Eddie also lost his funding.

Losing Your Message

Did you attend this presentation? We all did. It’s a long-running series of presentations given daily to audiences who influence our programs. This type of presentation is common in the world of military technical presentations. Unfortunately, the presenter loses an important message in poorly presented and irrelevant detail.

This article suggests eight tips for organizing and delivering a technically oriented presentation to a non-technical audience. Apply these tips and you will retain the audience; maybe you’ll even convince them to your way of thinking. Violate even one of these tips and, at best, you look no better than your competition.

Remember, our presentations reflect our attitudes as well as the delivered information. If we assume full responsibility for completion of an information ex-

change, we become effective presenters. When we cover as much information, in as detailed a manner as possible given the time constraints, we have a communications problem.

Effectively presenting information to an audience will positively influence our professional reputation more than any other skill we possess.

Now, read that line again.

Audience Expectations

Few people have any idea specifically what you do on a daily basis or how well you do it. When you stand to present information, your entire professional reputation stands with you. A poor presentation not only reflects on our information but even more, on us.

Audiences today expect high-quality presentations. They expect us to know our message, deliver it with some proficiency, and clearly state our needs. At the same time, “just let the facts speak for themselves” doesn’t work. Audiences bore quickly, retain little, and confuse easily. That last sentence may exaggerate reality, but if you treat it as reality you will not go far from wrong. Audiences expect us to complete the data connections and draw conclusions for them.

Presenters who deliver ideas with showmanship have a better chance for conveying their messages, and making themselves memorable. Audiences are people. They prefer working with people they like. If you employ some showmanship and make your presentation viewer-friendly, the audience will better accept you and your ideas. We invest our precious time preparing presentations; we expect them to work for us. Let’s give them every chance.

Audience Manipulation

Does this approach to presentations sound like audience manipulation? The answer depends on your viewpoint. I prefer the term preparation. When you have a major presentation, don’t you take care to look your best? Would you give your big presentation wearing jeans and tennis shoes? No? Then why allow the presentation to wear casual clothes? Shine your presentation and your shoes. Both matter.

Tip 1.

Know the audience and objective.

No matter how simple or complex the issue, you are presenting a managerial overview. What is the purpose of this presentation? Are you asking for a decision? Are you promoting a new idea? Are you updating management on program status? Are you protecting or searching for financial support? What specific action do you want from the audience as a result of your presentation?

Do you know your issue well enough to express it in one sentence of 15-20 words? Five to ten words would be better. (Example: Extending the EMD [Engineering and Manufacturing Development Phase] two years will add an additional 8 percent to the R&D [Research and Development] funding requirement.)

Never present information until you can phrase your issue succinctly. Address the specific purpose of the presentation and nothing else. If we expand the presentation beyond the specific objective, we may cause confusion or solicit irrelevant questions where our purpose suffers.

Once we understand the specific result we want from the presentation, we tailor our information to support the objective.

Knapp is a Project Director for M1A1 Conduct of Fire Trainer Rehost at U.S. Army Simulation, Training, and Instrumentation Command, Orlando, Fla., and holds an M.B.A. from Roosevelt University. He is an Advanced Toastmaster (Gold) and a member of the National Speakers Association.

We cannot “trot out” the standard canned presentation and expect it to fit any audience.

Tip 2.

What’s the point?

We make a specific point in every presentation. If we have more than three main points, a verbal presentation is the wrong way to present them. The audience cannot long stay with us in a verbal presentation. Any verbal presentation of an hour or less is really a management presentation. Treat your presentation as a managerial presentation. This means focus on communication of an idea or concept rather than teaching a technical subject.

From your audience’s point of view, they will only want to know what’s in it for them. The technical approach to how you implement your idea is nowhere near as significant to your audience as what the idea will do for them once implemented.

Tip 3.

Keep the presentation short, and focus only on the specific objective. I can’t think of any presenter who disappointed the audience by giving a shorter-than-anticipated presentation. We want to use all the time allotted and more if we can get it; but this is not effective on the audience. If we can follow the old adage to “stand up, speak up, shut up, sit down,” the audience will appreciate the message and us.

Tip 4.

Make the slides “viewer-friendly.” Make the old rule of thumb – no more than seven lines/no more than seven words – your style. The day of a black and white, text-laden overhead is over – if it ever existed at all. Use color slides. Check how the colors work together at varying distance. Do your col-



Tip 1:
Know the audience & objective.

Tip 2:
What’s the point?

Tip 3:
Keep the presentation short, and focus on the specific objective.

Tip 4:
Make the slides “viewer-friendly.”

Tip 5:
Use a handout.

Tip 6:
Use a computer (carefully) to present slides.

Tip 7:
Tell your story.

Tip 8:
Practice.

ors have enough distinction so that the audience realizes you have different colors? Black, dark blue, dark red, and dark green look about the same from 20 feet.

Use good clip-art. Some presenters hesitate to use clip-art as they feel it may not look professional. Quite the contrary – do not project your fears into the audience. The “important” audience consists of real live people. They have the same characteristics as any other people. Good clip-art adds interest to the visual. The audience will pay more attention looking to see how you will apply clips on later visuals. The rule is use some clips, but not a lot. Any edge helps. (To find additional slide preparation and styling tips, visit <http://www.presentersuniversity.com> on the Internet.)

Tip 5.

Use a handout.

I am not referring to the hard copy of your slides. I am referring to that technical information Eddie used to clutter his slide.

Most technical data looks cluttered on slides. If you must show detailed technical data, take the time to prepare a separate handout where tables, diagrams, and lengthy text can work to your advantage. You don’t have time to adequately explain intricate technical details – why present them at all?

Tip 6.

Use a computer (carefully) to present slides.

Computer presentations make the slide colors more vivid versus using overhead projectors. You look better prepared. You look professional.

When using the computer to present slides, resist the temptation to employ every presentation trick the computer supports. Some animation and video

Apply these tips and you will retain the audience; maybe you’ll even convince them to your way of thinking. Violate even one of these tips and, at best, you look no better than your competition.

can make the presentation memorable. A lot of animation and video becomes tedious. The presentation information is important; how a picture materializes is not important. You are trying to achieve a presentation objective. Unless you want to look like a nerd, don't get cute.

Tip 7.

Tell your story.

As a presenter, you tell a story. You do not read slides. The slides support you. The slides are not the story. You take raw material from the slides and make it memorable; bring your story to life.



Maj. Raymond D. Lacourse
U.S. Air Force

The entire staff and faculty of the Defense Systems Management College were shocked and saddened by the sudden death of Air Force Maj. Raymond D. "Ray" Lacourse Dec. 9, 1998. Lacourse was a student in the Advanced Program Management Course (APMC) Class 98-3. In memory of Lacourse, his APMC Section D classmates planted a tree and placed a plaque and monument at the DSMC main campus, Fort Belvoir, Va.

Many presenters read their slides because they did not prepare or rehearse the presentation. Their slides are their presentation. The results are unimpressive. When you present a fact, explain its importance; explain how it affects this audience.

Tip 8.

Practice.

Practice the presentation with visuals and handouts before a live audience. Your team or support group will provide feedback on your presentation. Use their comments to strengthen the presentation.

Support groups prefer to give positive comments about presentations. If you ask each person for two strengths and two possible improvements, you will receive concrete examples to incorporate into the presentation.

Eddie's presentation promoted audience confusion and apathy. The result was a disaster. If you apply the eight tips presented here, you will be the one remembered, and your position positively implemented.

A Big Day, A Big Diploma for Graduates of APMC 98-3



Class President John C. Schaeffer, Jr. (center), accepts a large symbolic diploma on behalf of the 350 graduates of DSMC's Advanced Program Management Course (APMC 98-3). The class graduated Dec. 18, 1998, at Essayons Theater, Fort Belvoir, Va. The typical student of Class 98-3 was 41.5 years old, with 17.5 years of government service and 11 years of prior acquisition experience. On average, 71.2 percent of the students had a master's degree or higher. Pictured from left: Graduation keynote speaker, Air Force Lt. Gen. Frank B. Campbell, Joint Staff Director for Force Structure, Resources and Assessment; Schaeffer; Navy Rear Adm. Lenn Vincent, DSMC Commandant.

Photo by Richard Mattox