Fix Your Presentations: 21 Quick Tips

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Most business presentations range from incredibly boring to, well ... just plain boring. I'm sure you have a few offenders within your own team.

It doesn't have to be this way, though.

Here are 21 ways to make certain that your presentations hold your audience's interest–and help them make the decision you want them to make.

Preparation

Build a story. Presentations are boring when they present scads of information without any context or meaning. Instead, tell a story, with the audience as the main characters (and, specifically, the heroes).

Keep it relevant. Audiences only pay attention to stories and ideas that are immediately relevant. Consider what decision you want them to make, then build an appropriate case.

Cut your intro. A verbose introduction that describes you, your firm, your topic, how you got there, only bores people. Keep your intro down to a sentence or two, even for a long presentation.

Begin with an eye-opener. Kick off your talk by revealing a shocking fact, a surprising insight, or a unique perspective that naturally leads into your message and the decision you want made.

Keep it short and sweet. When was the last time you heard someone complain that a presentation was too short? Make it half as long as you originally thought it should be (or even shorter).

Use facts, not generalities. Fuzzy concepts reflect fuzzy thinking. Buttress your argument, story and message with facts that are quantifiable, verifiable, memorable and dramatic.

Customize for every audience. One-size-fits-all presentations are like one-size-fits-all clothes; they never fit right and usually make you look bad. Every audience is different; your presentation should be too.

Simplify your graphics. People shut off their brains when confronted with complicated drawings and tables. Use very simple graphics and highlight the data points that are important.

Keep backgrounds in the background. Fancy slide backgrounds only make it more difficult for the audience to focus on what's important. Use a simple, single color, neutral color background.

Use readable fonts. Don't try to give your audience to get an eyestrain headache by using tiny fonts. Use large fonts in simple faces (like Arial); avoid boldface, italics and ALL-CAPS.

Don't get too fancy. You want your audience to remember your message, not how many special effects and visual gimcracks you used. In almost all cases, the simpler the better.

Presentation

Check your equipment ... in advance. If you must use PowerPoint, or plan on showing videos or something, check to make sure that the setup really works. Then check it again. Then one more time.

Speak to the audience. Great public speakers keep their focus on the audience, not their slides or their notes. Focusing on the audience encourages them to focus on your and your message.

Never read from slides. Guess what? Your audience can read. If you're reading from your slides, you're not just being boring–you're also insulting the intelligence of everyone in the room.

Don't skip around. Nothing makes you look more disorganized than skipping over slides, backtracking to previous slides, or showing slides that don't really belong. If there are slides that don't fit, cut them out of the presentation in advance.

Leave humor to the professionals. Unless you're really good at telling jokes, don't try to be a comedian. Remember: When it comes to business presentations, polite laughter is the kiss of death.

Avoid obvious wormholes. Every audience has hot buttons that command immediate attention and cause every other discussion to grind to a halt. Learn what they are and avoid them.

Skip the jargon. Business buzzwords make you sound like you're either pompous, crazy, or (worst case) speaking in tongues. Cut them out–both from your slides and from your vocabulary.

Make it timely. Schedule presentations for a time when the audience can give you proper attention. Avoid end of day, just before lunch, and the day before a holiday.

Prepare some questions. If you're going to have a Q&A at the end of your presentation, be prepared to get the ball rolling by having up a question or two up your sleeve.

Have a separate handout. If there's data that you want the audience to have, put it into a separate document for distribution after your talk. Don't use your slide deck as a data repository.