

Practically Perfect Presentations

BY RICHARD M. HARRIS

You can't improve on a good presentation. Or can you? Here are some PRACTICAL elements that turn good presenters into excellent ones.

Stop and think. When was the last time you were favorably impressed by an oral presentation? So few speakers engage us enough to make it seem worth our while to listen.

Let's look at it another way. How many people can you think of who qualify as good speakers? Maybe you're even one of them. Now let's narrow it down a bit. Do you know any presenters who display the even rarer quality of true excellence? What does it take to be an excellent presenter, anyhow?

Let's differentiate between the behaviors of a good speaker and those of an excellent one. In so doing, we can get a better perspective on how to make oral communication more effective and productive.

An average, competent speaker is someone who has a goal in mind, sticks to the point, and talks in a reasonably interesting, clear, and relevant fashion. The better-than-average presenter does a lot more.

PRACTICAL qualities

The better-than-average presenter pays attention to nine important issues:

- ▶ Partnership
- ▶ Rhetorical questions

- ▶ Ability to be spontaneous
- ▶ Conversational style
- ▶ Tone of voice
- ▶ Involvement
- ▶ Creativity
- ▶ Acute relevance
- ▶ Lucidity.

Together, the first letters of those qualities spell out "practical." Let's consider each area in detail.

A sense of partnership. We tend to place ourselves at the center of our speaking. That's natural enough. But too much of it can cut us off from our audience. Nothing kills a presentation faster than one-sidedness, which leaves listeners out. It's no wonder that presenters sometimes seem aloof to their audiences, who think of them as lecturing.

Many average speakers hide their vulnerability behind a posture of detachment. But wise speakers include others in their remarks. You can easily bring in your audience with such words as "you," "your," "we," "us," "our," and "let's." A simple gesture, such as extending your hand toward listeners, can reinforce this sense of a joint venture between speaker and listeners.

Such "deliberate displacement" techniques can help you refocus your attention away from you and out

toward your audience. This strategy intensifies your feelings of identity with the group and enhances your listeners' feelings of identity with you and your message. The effect can be a sharp reduction in stress and a dramatic increase in rapport.

Consider, for example, the power of such statements as these, when spoken to a class:

▶ "Some of you may be wondering why we're taking time today to discuss these issues."

▶ "You can probably think of other examples from your workplace that affect all of us in a similar way."

That deliberate displacement actively brings speaker and audience into a relationship that's heavy on communication—in other words, into a partnership.

Rhetorical questions. Too many trainers think of the presentation effort as a one-way transmission that pushes true information toward listeners. Such a restricted view robs us of an opportunity to interact with others in a sort of presentation-as-dialogue, with the trainer as the lead speaker.

How is it possible to achieve that kind of dialogue? Excellent presenters manage it through the use of rhetorical questions, which are those

self-posed queries that don't really expect answers. Rhetorical questions stimulate thought. Their interactive nature adds interest to a presentation. Some examples of rhetorical questions you can pose to make an audience think:

- ▶ "Why should you be interested in field sales automation?"
- ▶ "Who says finance can't be folksy?"
- ▶ "What exactly is an applications chemist?"

Pause at the end of such questions, to help listeners feel—even more—that you are addressing them personally. That feeling can enhance each person's sense of being a part owner of what is taking place.

Spontaneity. You're up on your feet in the front of the room. You are about to inform, update, or persuade the trainees. You wish your presentation could come off as spontaneous and "free-flowing," even in the middle of a carefully prepared lesson plan. Well, it can! You will sound more spontaneous if you make an occasional comment on your own remarks (or on the present situation), as we all naturally do in conversation.

Imagine that a friend is talking

with you. Suddenly, he or she says, "You probably know where I'm going with this...." Or, someone is giving you a sales pitch. Coming to the part about volume discounts, the salesperson says, "It almost sounds like retail, doesn't it?" Even more common are "No pun intended," and "Just kidding."

Such "meta-talk," or talking about talk, gives spoken words a human dimension. It can disarm your listeners, because they aren't expecting it. And it provides a welcome relief from the usual, linear sequence of speech. If you generally improvise through anecdotes and ad-libbed remarks, then you are, in a sense, already using meta-talk.

A conversational tone. Most presentations are astonishingly pedestrian—hardly compelling at all. And many speakers seem uncomfortable in their self-imposed, formal presentation styles. But audiences—at least, in the United States—are more likely to enjoy and remember a talk that is conversationally presented.

What elements transform a formal speaking style into a more relaxed, informal mode? We have already noted some: deliberate displacement,

rhetorical questions, and meta-talk. Some other techniques:

- ▶ gesturing (more on this below)
- ▶ moving around the room now and then
- ▶ using contractions
- ▶ using directives; in other words, using command forms such as "Think!" and "Don't forget!"
- ▶ inserting conversational tidbits, such as "obviously," "after all," and "let's face it."

In most business situations in the United States, listeners are put at ease by speakers who "talk their language" instead of sounding stilted or affected. A conversational speaking style keeps everyone on equal terms. The audience easily hears and understands the spoken message. And, like a well-functioning team, the audience and the speaker develop a give-and-take relationship.

Tone of voice. We are trained to pay more attention to printed words themselves than to their expressive content. You may feel confident about your ideas. But to be a stimulating speaker, you need to feel just as confident about the expression you give them.

The ability to utilize the full, rich range of vocal accents and dynamics is surely one of the keys to the success of a presenter.

Do you, for example, "italicize" spoken words? In other words, do you "come down hard" on them, verbally? Placing proper emphasis on key words selects them for priority attention.

Can you control silences without being terrified of a moment of thoughtful repose? Pauses help your listeners digest what you're saying. The overfamiliar "uh" destroys concentration. Silence need not signal a vocal lapse.

Variety in intonation (speech melody) is another way in which excellent speakers seize and hold attention.

Involvement through gesture. Another way you can speak with more commitment and vigor is to use your hands. Often, we are on sure ground, technically. We know when we are supposed to gesture with our hands, and we have been instructed in the appropriate movements to make. The problems may come in

Excellent Presentations Made PRACTICAL: A Summary

What differentiates an excellent speaker from a merely good one? The answer is a list of nine issues that excellent speakers understand and make use of. Together, the first letters of the nine elements form the acronym PRACTICAL.

Partnership. An excellent speaker talks to create a sense of partnership, enabling listeners to share in what is being presented.

Rhetorical questions. An excellent speaker uses rhetorical questions to focus listeners, set their minds to thinking, and bring them closer.

Ability to be spontaneous. An excellent speaker adds "meta-talk," or remarks about the presentation as it progresses, to provide something new and unexpected.

Conversational. An excellent speaker strives to speak in a conversational style, rather than a formal one. Most listeners—at least, in the United States—find it easier to

digest and appreciate an informal, familiar style of speech.

Tone of voice. An excellent speaker takes advantage of the rich range of vocal resources available to increase interest, impact, and persuasive power.

Involving. An excellent speaker involves listeners through the skillful use of hand gestures.

Creative. An excellent speaker shows imagination and resourcefulness by drawing on a variety of verbal tools to enliven presentations and renew enthusiasm.

Acutely relevant. An excellent speaker combines well-chosen, familiar examples and sharply defining gestures to convey unmistakable meaning.

Lucidly clear. An excellent speaker helps listeners attain unambiguous understanding through imagery, self-paraphrasing and direct involvement in visual aids.

the persuasive execution of those gestures—in making the movements seem natural, expressive, and convincing. All too often, they come across as halfhearted, happenstance, nondescript, and ineffective.

Watch the average speaker. Notice the almost self-conscious avoidance of most hand movements. This avoidance can rob words of their potential impact. Such speakers seem distant and uninvolved. Even the speakers themselves feel disengaged—because they are.

Gesturing makes an essential contribution to the quality of the spoken message. It deserves our utmost attention. But how can we use our hands to excellent effect? We can do so by understanding gestures, getting comfortable with them, and making the most of them.

Think how you might use your hands to convey the full meaning of the following sentences:

- ▶ “My main task is to provide a solid base for our customers while we integrate the two operating entities.”
- ▶ “The consolidation, which establishes a single global brand name for the agencies, creates the third largest such international network.”

Forego flamboyance, but also avoid understatement. Gestures provide a visual narrative that goes along with the verbal one. Think of them as “displayed thinking.”

Giving appropriate movement to words requires a little thought and practice. For starters, you might begin by using your hands to “visualize” for your listeners the following concepts as they come up in your remarks: numbers up to five, personalization of ideas (to yourself and to your audience), sizes, shapes, changes in direction, and action verbs such as “boost” and “expand.”

Before long, your execution of the hand movements will tighten with practice. Your gestures will convey a greater sense of confidence and definition. You will be communicating in a wordlessly eloquent way.

Creativity. You may say, “I’m often called on to speak on the same subject. Is there some way I can vary things a bit to keep up my own interest level?” That’s a valid concern. It’s one thing to be informative; it’s another to be constantly challenging

Verbal Tools for Creative Presentations

Are you growing bored with presenting the same old material week in and week out? It may be time to vary your presentation by spicing up your language. You can gain a personal sense of renewal by using a variety of verbal tools. Keep these possibilities in mind the next time you need a new way of saying the same old thing:

▶ **Analogies.** “A is like B.” Such comparisons build a “window” through which the listeners can instantly see what you’re driving at. For example, you could say, “Reading between the lines is like peeling an onion,” or, “We’re talking about a large, busy distribution center; it’s like FAO Schwartz at Christmas.” These are also images that stay in the mind.

▶ **Alliteration.** String along, in succession, two or more words beginning with the same first sound. Some examples include “pallid presentation,” “tools for teams,” and “employee empowerment.”

▶ **Plays on words.** For example, an American Airlines advertisement announcing nonstop flights said, “We’re pulling out all the stops.”

▶ **Rhymes.** A 7-Up soft-drink ad proclaims, “When you want the taste of ‘un,’ there’s only one.” A Lysol disinfectant ad says to, “Put mold on hold.”

and motivating. The proof of a speaker’s mettle lies, in part, in how well the presentation holds up week in and week out.

With frequent repetition, any of us may begin to sound ragged, remote, and routine. Presentation burnout can reduce enthusiasm and effectiveness in speaking. It is quite common, and it can be costly.

Someone once said, “To do really well, you sometimes have to get out of your own backyard.” This means tuning in to the environment and going beyond the traditional confines of your subject area to find ways to revive a sluggish presentation.

Your creative capacity grows as you build your awareness of verbal

tools—such as those listed in the box “Verbal Tools for Creative Presentations”—as well as other, similar resources. Look and listen for them in other people’s talks and in the print media. Use them in your own talks, and your style will remain sharp and lively.

Relevance. Your success depends on how easily your listeners can relate, in a personal way, to your topic. Does it affect their work? Does it affect their families? Does it touch their lives?

An excellent speaker is not content with letting the subject speak for itself. She or he prepares the words and delivery to bring home to listeners the full import of the message. The excellent speaker engineers the presentation to ensure that it will strike a strong chord with listeners.

Clarity. Lucidity is a matter of degree. The excellent presenter achieves an admirable clarity of expression. Meanings are unmistakably clear. A consistency of message results in uniform understanding by all; in other words, everyone receives the same message and understands the same implications. Such a speaker’s talk compels attention. Outlines and details are not vague, but vivid.

Road map to excellence

The nine PRACTICAL elements of excellent presentations make up a powerful road map for change. Use it to empower yourself and your colleagues to excel in presentation performance—and to build confidence through success. As you draw on a wider range of tools to enhance the value of your messages, your professionalism will become increasingly evident and increasingly motivating.

In short, you will be well on your way from being an average presenter to becoming an excellent one. ■

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