

Presentation Tips From the Pros

These show-and-tell masters stand and deliver 70-plus tips for everyone from newbie trainers to seasoned keynote speakers.



By Donna J. Abernathy

The presenter just stepped out in front of hundreds of physicians at the American College of Surgeons Annual Conference. It's a sea of navy and black suits, and there she is in her nifty company T-shirt. (Wow.)

But wow is what she has to deliver. *Now*. She has to hit them with her best antidote to boredom, so she steps from behind the podium, flings up her arms, and exclaims, "Welcome to Mr. Toad's Wild Ride! It's our goal over the next three hours to guide you through the steps from being an Internet novice to being someone who can perform a nested, parenthetical, literal Boolean query from a free Medline search, and even know what all of that means!" The audience blinks, grins, and then laughs. *Hey, this is cool.*



The story, told by Diane Cunningham, president of California-based D&D Enterprises, is true, and she's the one in the T-shirt comparing the gathering to a Disney ride that's based on a *Wind in the Willows* character.

Cunningham leads a post-graduate Internet training seminar at the ACS conference every year and swears by the Ho Hum Presentation Formula cooked up more than 50 years ago at General Electric by two engineers named Borden and Bussy. Cunningham says, "The formula can be used for standup presentations, documents, online courses, manuals, anything." Here's the formula, courtesy of Cunningham and Presenter's University, www.presentersuniversity.com.

□ **Ho hum.** This is the grabber to knock attendees off their expectations and get them thinking. People often come into presentations, especially technical ones, thinking, "Ho hum, another boring presentation." So, you deliver a "ho hum" that wows them out of complacency.

□ **Why bring that up?** So, your "ho hum" shook the audience out of its boredom, but what exactly did you just say? In this step, you tell everyone the purpose of the presentation and why the topic is important.

□ **For example.** Now the audience is primed for the meat of the presentation—the content and examples. They comprise the bulk of your message.

□ **So what?** Here's your chance to wrap up everything in a summary—the bow on the presentation package, so to speak.

That formula can help grab people's attention, convey information, and make sure they understand what you're talking about. It helps Cunningham broach technical topics in an offbeat, nonintimidating way. Just ask this self-confessed techno-weenie about her Internet Protocol dance that explains how the Web works. Who says that learning can't be fun?

All presenters and trainers aren't techno-weenies, but because presentations are increasingly going digital, they have to keep up with new technology. The demand for high-quality presentation media, such as animation, audio, and video, is on the rise, according to the International Association of Presentation Professionals. Seventy-five percent of IAPP members are involved in some form of Website development or online show-and-tell, compared to less than 20 percent three years ago.

Sure, there's debate over whether technology is more a help or hindrance. Does PowerPoint come between a presenter and his or her audience? Does checking miles of computer and mul-

timedia projector wires rob a presenter of valuable prep and connection time? Perhaps. But let's remember that slide projectors of old jammed, ate slides, and took random days off. The beat goes on, and presenters adapt. At its heart, presenting remains a decidedly human event.

Whether you're new to the training field or an experienced conference speaker, here's help from some of the best.



One thing that Dianna Booher has learned over the years is how to be flexible. She recounts one potentially disastrous presentation in which she noticed too many familiar faces milling into the room. As it turned out, she had delivered the same speech a year earlier at the group's national conference but had been

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reassured by the company contact that this would be a completely different group. Well, he was 80 percent wrong; only 20 percent had not heard Booher's presentation before. So, you can imagine her apprehension about delivering the same speech to much the same group. She offered to speak on a different topic, but her contact insisted that she stay with the original plan. Try as she might to remember which anecdotes and illustrations she'd used a year earlier in order to substitute new ones, she couldn't. Says Booher, "I felt like a TV summer rerun every minute of that very, very long hour."

Booher says that if you want to become a better presenter, hone your facilitation skills. "A good way to do that is to be a fly on the wall in someone else's spirited meeting, Simply sit and observe, or do a sociogram. Map the interactions in the meeting to identify how the facilitator keeps on track while inviting audience input. Then, try to emulate those techniques with large groups of your own."

It's also important to keep up with new trends and techniques. Booher belongs to The Speakers Roundtable, a group of 20-plus presentation pros who meet twice a year to network and help each other improve their speaking skills. She also learns from other people she talks with and remarks, "Some colleagues, I'm told, dismiss less-experienced people. I try not to do that. Even when a neophyte asks me a question, I try to be alert to what I, in turn, can learn from him or her."

Here are Booher's tips for new trainers and presenters.

1. Overprepare. Know your content inside and out so that if you get nervous, you

can focus on the *how* of your delivery.

2. Don't do just a mental rehearsal. There's nothing like a physical walk-through to build your confidence and perfect the timing.

3. Don't become a slide narrator. Beginning speakers, in an attempt to have adequate notes and prompts at hand, tend to use too many slides and put all of their key points on them. Don't let the slides become the presentation.

4. Know why you were asked to do the presentation. That will give you a sense of the new perspective you're expected to bring to the event.

5. Don't talk at people; talk with them. Consider a speech to be a conversation with an audience larger than one.

For those of you who have more presenting experience, Booher offers these ideas:

6. Customize, customize, customize. Canned comments aren't enough.

7. Stay up-to-date. Read continually in your area of expertise so you can add fresh anecdotes, statistics, and insight.

8. Create new concepts, processes, or applications. Don't borrow other people's material and points and try to make them your own. You can't build your credibility on someone else's work.

9. Continually work for interaction. A reflective question followed by a long pause can be a more effective way for participants to examine a new idea than to play three games without their brains in gear.

10. Stir your passion for a topic. If you don't feel passionate about what you want an audience to do, neither will the audience. Genuine emotion almost always comes through—positively or negatively.



Thomas Crum travels around the world leading seminars and training for such organizations as Ashland Chemical Company, Home Savings, McDonald's, and the U.S. Treasury Department. He includes principles and movements from Aikido (which he has taught), Tai Chi Chuan, and other mind-and-body martial arts in his presentations to create an experiential approach to conflict resolution and stress management.

Here are Crum's best tips for becoming a master presenter.

11. Teach what you love, and live a life that shows it.

12. Open up. Be authentic, open, and vulnerable, and your audience will do likewise.

13. Keep it simple and to the point.

14. Reinforce the learning. Reinforce each point with theory and research, experiential exercises to integrate the point, a true story to provide anecdotal evidence, and open discussion.

15. Keep it alive. Keep the learning alive with a continual flow of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning.

16. Have fun. Your audience will, too. Learning and laughter go hand in hand.

17. Make it relevant. Create an action plan for and with participants to help them incorporate the learning points into their lives.

18. Summarize. Provide a summary of learning points and a special closure that celebrates participants' learning.

19. Begin and end on time.

20. Be available afterwards. You are there for your audience. Elvis has *not* left the building.



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time before your presentation to meet people as they come into the room. Arrive in time to set up and test your equipment and still have 20 minutes to talk with people.

22. Remember that you are the presentation. Generating and maintaining energy are critical. No matter how effective your visuals are, you carry the responsibility for the

audience's experience. Your voice and body are important tools. Modulate your tone. Speak loudly to emphasize important points. Be dramatic to draw attention, and speak softly as a contrast. Move around.

23. Never give away any answers. Most likely, someone in the audience will know as much or more about the topic than you do. And most people will know something. Use that. The more an audience is involved in the presentation, the easier and more fun it is for the presenter, and the more effective it is for the audience.

24. Don't read your slides. Give the audience a chance to read your slides before you start speaking. During the few seconds that they're not listening to you, acknowledge that. Ask them to look at the slide and then to refocus their attention on you.

25. Plan the beginning. Most often, the success of a presentation depends on the first five to 10 minutes. That's the amount of time that most people take to decide whether to stay.

And for you seasoned pros, here are some of Dublin's ideas to help you further hone your skills.

26. Design your presentation from an audience's perspective. Review your slides from an audience's perspective

and ask yourself, *So what?* If the answer isn't clear, you should consider revising the slide or its sequence.

27. Remember that context is powerful. There's a great cartoon that shows two fish in a fishbowl. One says to the other, "Water? What water?" The clearer the context in which you frame your ideas, the more powerful the understanding and impact. Paint the big picture as well as the details.

28. Be a provocateur, not a presenter. Try delivering most of your content through a series of questions rather than statements. For each slide, develop a provocative question that will unveil or lead people to answers or points you want to make.

29. Be illustrative. Stories and examples bring concepts to life. Use situations from the audience.

30. Remember that timing is everything. Don't fill up the allotted time with so many stories and examples that there's no time at the end for questions or a summary.

When Doug Malouf has a major presentation on tap, he's up at 4 a.m. to practice delivering the presentation to a spot on the wall. Then he goes back to bed. He explains it all with a Ken McFarland quote: "Behind every spectacular presentation is an unspectacular preparation."

Says Malouf, author of several books on presenting, "Once your mind's eye has seen the audience listening to a presentation, the real event is like a walk in the park." But that's only when equipment and space are working with you, not against. Malouf has been to places where people thought that the overhead projector was a camera, so no power cords were provided. He has presented poolside, on cabin cruisers, and in rooms where the ceilings were too low for standard screens.

"My biggest disaster," says Malouf, "was a big conference in New Zealand. I packed my overhead transparencies in the same suitcase as my good suits. My luggage headed to Japan, and I went to Auckland. So, my toys travel with me now as cabin luggage."

Here are Malouf's rules for beginning trainers and presenters.

Lance Dublin can tell you all about the importance of knowing your audience. At one international conference, he developed handouts and chose a baseball theme to illustrate some of the important points. "It was only when I began to ask the audience questions to find out who they were and why they had come to the conference that I found out that 40 percent of them were from countries outside of North America!" Live and learn.

To psych himself up for a big presentation, Dublin spends time in the presentation room and on the stage to become familiar with the physical layout and feel of the room. He doesn't like to rehearse formally. Rather, he outlines the first 10 to 15 minutes and writes a script for the first two to three minutes to fix it in his mind. He says that it's important to connect with an audience in the first five minutes. "Typically I do that by asking people to raise their hands in response to general questions. That gives me time to catch my breath, get my adrenaline under control, and set the pace for the rest of my presentation."

Here are Dublin's top tips for novice presenters.

21. Begin before the beginning. Use the



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take a one-day acting course. If people don't buy the messenger, they won't buy the message.

35. Stay at it. The more you present, the easier it gets. There's a lesson to learn every time.

For those more experienced with presenting, Malouf offers these tips:

36. Change. Doing the same program day after day can be boring.

Constantly ask how you can do it in a new fun and exciting way, and revise.

37. Concentrate on the process. Be creative in devising ways to increase participation. Watch some of the pros, see how they work the crowd, and modify some of those ideas for yourself.

38. Take a break.

Trainers and presenters burn out, so block out your calendar and recharge the batteries. For example, you can use a conference as a sabbatical to stay in a nice hotel, learn, and network with some exciting people. It's called

becoming a student again.

39. Rejuvenate your presentation skills. Attend a National Speakers or Toastmasters meeting. Find associated industries in which you can gain exposure to the top presenters. You can also listen to audiotapes during your travels.

40. Stay motivated. Read more, learn more, and stretch out of your comfort zone. Doing the same things in the same way every day and expecting a different result is the definition of insanity. With the Internet playing such an active role in research, there's no excuse for not staying current.



Geri McArdle once walked into a five-day, overhead-transparency-driven seminar to discover that none of the 60 or so overheads due from another location had arrived. The slides contained lots of theory and activities, but lucky for McArdle she had done her homework the night before reviewing materials, making storyboards, and drawing pictures to remember key points. She says, "I stepped from behind the projector and made instant contact with the audience. Who needs overheads?"

McArdle says that the most important skill for presenters is knowing how

31. Practice, rehearse, and drill. In one study, people were asked to rank their fears in order. Sixty-eight percent said death was number 1; 32 percent said public speaking was number 1. That means that one-third would rather die than speak. Many trainers feel the same way. The only way to overcome such fear is to practice and rehearse. You never lose the fear; you learn to control it.

32. Evaluate everything. Examine every presentation and ask, "What could I do next time to make it more effective?" Have a friend give you some positive feedback so that every event is a learning event. And don't work in front of a video camera at first; you're not a professional actor. Video is unforgiving and can give you negative feedback too early in your development.

33. Limit the content. When you're new to training, you may become content-centered. As you grow more confident, you'll understand that it's better to learn one or two things effectively than many ineffectively.

34. Get professional help. Every budding trainer should

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Speaker's Self-Assessment

Use this checklist for self-assessment of audio- or videotapes of your practice sessions or actual performances. You can also ask a friendly critic to help you practice and complete the assessment. Here's how it works: Put a checkmark in a box to indicate that you did what it says. Use an X to indicate that you did not. If an item doesn't apply, leave that box blank. Last, add comments or directions that will remind you of changes that may help improve your next presentation.

- Chose a title that tied audience interests to the topic.
- Used an attention-getting opening.
- Presented the body of the speech in an organized, logical sequence.
- Used a conversational tone.
- Demonstrated an appropriate degree of formality.
- Used personal pronouns (*you, we, I*).
- Avoided jargon.
- Explained technical terms.
- Handled notes unobtrusively.
- Handled the microphone professionally.
- Avoided nervous gestures or posture.
- Made eye contact with individuals in the audience.
- Avoided staring at one section or person in the audience.
- Used gestures that supported, rather than detracted from, words.
- Used pertinent, inoffensive humor.
- Spoke loudly enough.
- Varied the speaking pace.
- Avoided speaking too fast or too slowly, and used emphasis appropriately.
- Paused for audience reaction.
- Avoided pause fillers (*um, er, uh, ok?*)
- Varied voice pitch.
- Spoke clearly.
- Pronounced words and acronyms correctly.
- Dressed appropriately.
- Met time requirements within five minutes.
- Presented a memorable conclusion.

Comments:

Source "Improve Your Communication and Speaking Skills," *Info-line*, ASTD

47. Organize. Raise organizational skills to an art form.

48. Listen to hear.

49. Care for each person.

50. Be credible. Remember that credibility takes intention and work.



In 1973, Bob Pike says his understanding of training changed forever. He realized that most adult learners, exposed to hours of lecture-based training, begin to daydream, fidget, and generally lose interest in what the trainer is saying. So, he attended a seminar based on participant-centered training. Instead of lecture—which typically comprises 80 to 90 percent of most training sessions—the instructor made introductory remarks and passed out written materials for group discussion. After each discussion, they moved on to the next activity. By the end of the session, Pike realized that he could recall almost all of the discussions because he was involved in his own learning.

Now, he uses those same concepts in his business. Says Pike, "In our programs, we use the 90/20/8 rule. No module that we teach ever runs more than 90 minutes, the pace changes every 20 minutes, and we try to involve people in the content every eight minutes. That is based on Tony Buzan's book, *Use Both Sides of Your Brain*, in which he writes that the average adult

to use the instructional systems design model to design, develop, and deliver training. "The ISD model is the tool of the trade," she says. "Using the model provides a structure for designers and trainers to create training that ensures a successful presentation. The best way to master the ISD model is to practice and learn with each design and delivery."

She also says that practice is the best way to psych yourself up for a presentation. "I reorganize my presentation each time. I add new things that enhance learning. New things are fun to teach; it's a journey of discovery."

Here are some of McArdle's tips for trainers and presenters just starting out.

41. Be prepared. Master the content, and manage your time.

42. Be practical. Deliver what is needed.

43. Focus on performance. Teach to the objective; test to the objective.

44. Deliver effectively. Listen and process.

45. Facilitate learning. Appropriately access the three roles of the training professional: trainer, facilitator, and coach.

And for the seasoned pro, here are more ideas from McArdle.

46. Create vision. Deliver new information each time.

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can listen with understanding for only 90 minutes, but can listen with retention for 20 minutes.

Here are Pike's presentation tips for neophyte presenters.

51. Have the room ready 15 minutes before the first participant arrives. This ensures that problems are solved before participants are in the room.

52. Spend the next 15 minutes greeting participants and making them feel welcome. Then, you present to an audience that you've already connected with.

53. Make your handouts interactive. Have participants add a caption or fill in a key word to increase their attention, retention, and participation.

54. Cover housekeeping. Demonstrate to participants that their time will be well spent. Cover housekeeping in small chunks or just before the first break.

55. Be instructor-led but participant-centered. Help participants develop their own answers, apply tools and techniques, use reference materials, and tap resources (their own and their colleagues') to reach solutions that work in the session and back on the job.

56. Have at least two ways to teach everything. That allows you to change your presentation to keep it fresh for yourself, while still covering content that participants need.

57. Have your visuals available in at least two different formats. If PowerPoint goes down, have overheads on hand. The medium isn't the message, as Marshall McLuhan said. The medium supports the message.

58. Put one-third of the content you plan to cover in an appendix. If you end on time, participants will feel they're getting a bonus when you cover the appendix. If Q&A bogs you down or technical difficulties arise, par-

ticipants have the content you don't get to cover in a complete form for later use.

59. Have people line up at the session, beginning by their level of knowledge or experience in the subject. They can do that through discussion with each other. Or, as a twist, ask them to do it nonverbally. Then, have participants count off so that they're divided into groups of five to seven. That will help ensure an even distribution of knowledge or experience, and help you add their expertise to your own.

60. Once in a while, learn something totally out of your area of expertise. That will remind you of what it's like to be a beginner and will keep you sensitive to participants as they struggle with content that you may find basic.



Fran Solomon once gave a program that was mistaken for standup comedy. The audience was drunk, the band was setting up behind her, and expectations weren't quite clear. She now makes sure that clients know that she's a humorist, not a comic, and she tries not to speak following an open bar. That's great advice for all of us.

Solomon doesn't overanalyze the preparation part of presenting. She says, "I feel grateful for the opportunity to speak; I think of myself as a teacher. Butterflies come with the job, so I just reframe nervousness as excitement." It is important, however, to hone skills such as flexibility and interaction. You can take an improvisation class

to help spontaneity. Says Solomon, "Be willing to let go of your outline, speech, or expectations. Listen carefully to an audience's body language, noise level, and response. People should have a chance to move around every 20 minutes."

Here are Solomon's to-the-point tips for new presenters and trainers.

61. Watch experienced speakers.

62. Use interactive activities.

63. Take improvisation theater classes.

64. Watch and listen. Watch yourself on video, and listen to yourself on audio.

65. Be yourself. Be willing to be vulnerable.

66. Love what you do.

67. Remember that silence is as important as speaking.

68. Control your environment.

For more experienced presenters, Solomon offers these ideas:

69. Keep taking risks.

70. Give back. Do free speeches for good causes.

71. Mentor young trainers. They can teach you a lot.

72. Take time to renew yourself.

73. Be an instrument of something larger than yourself.

It's difficult to succeed in this business for 15-plus years without enjoying what you're doing. These "people" people thrive on helping others learn. But, more importantly, they thrive on learning from others. They respect themselves and their audiences. And it shows. □

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Org Chart

Here are some organizations that support and promote presenters and trainers.

Organization

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