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The Power Presenter

Techniques, Style, and Strategy from America's Top Speaking Coach

Jerry Weissman • Wiley © 2009 • 272 pages

Workplace Skills / Communication / Presenting

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Take-Aways

- Anyone can learn to become a powerful presenter.
- In every speech, your words are far less important than how you deliver them.
- In fact, your body language counts most of all.
- When you establish empathy with the members of your audience, they will automatically empathize with you and, thus, be more receptive to your points.
- However, creating empathy is almost impossible if you are nervous.
- Unfortunately, your involuntary “fight or flight” physiological response can undermine your emotional equilibrium when you speak publicly.
- To ease your agitation when you speak publicly, concentrate on the audience, not on yourself. This will immediately make you feel better.
- Being fully practiced and prepared will also help quell your nervousness.
- Be conversational when you speak. Talk to the people in your audience one by one.
- Graphics should support your presentation; don't let them dominate it.

Recommendation

Many people would rather try to flush a snarling bobcat down the toilet than give a speech. Indeed, individuals often rate public speaking as a primary fear. Delivering a speech summons the same jacked-up “fight or flight” response that animals depend upon to survive predator attacks. Your breathing rate shoots through the roof. You cannot think clearly. You are suddenly in severe physical crisis. Unfortunately, when you give a speech, you cannot fight your way out of trouble or run away from it. Instead, you must somehow stand there calmly, and speak in a coherent, compelling fashion. Premier speaking coach Jerry Weissman shows how to quell those stressful feelings. In this clearly written book – which features an attractive design that makes his examples particularly easy to follow – he provides a comprehensive set of public speaking techniques to help you win over any audience. *getAbstract* is glad to speak up for this book and its fascinating case histories about famous speakers, including an insightful analysis of the fateful 1960 U.S. presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. History might have been different if Nixon had read Weissman’s book before he went on TV. If you hope to rise in sales or business, not to mention politics, you must be able to give a great presentation – this book will show you how.

Summary

You Can Become a Powerful Presenter

In 1990, Cisco Systems, a communication technology company, introduced its initial public offering (IPO). CEO John Morgridge went on the road to make presentations to potential investors. As an experienced businessman, he was more than competent to deliver the facts and figures about his company in a clear, compelling fashion. However, Morgridge was not a presentations expert. Plus, Cisco is a highly technical entity, so its “IPO story” could have been confusing for some people. Morgridge invested in presentation coaching so he could tell Cisco’s story in the strongest possible way. This investment paid a huge dividend. Originally, the company expected its IPO to sell at \$13.50 to \$15.50 per share, but the actual price was \$18. Morgridge told the media he felt presentation coaching made the difference in his results. You can develop the same presentation skills.

How Much Do Your Words Matter?

When it comes to public speaking, the words you use are not as important as how you use them (vocal delivery) and how you present yourself (body language). Look at this breakdown:

- Words account for only 7% of the impact of any presentation.
- The “vocal component” accounts for 38%
- The “visual component,” a whopping 55%.

“Speaking before a group is widely considered to be one of the most anxiety-ridden experiences known to humankind.”

Great presenters rely on nonverbal communication, body language and other physical cues. Consider the late President Ronald Reagan, who was known as the “Great Communicator” because of his powerful

speaking style. Reagan exuded personality and charisma. When *The Los Angeles Times*' TV critic, Howard Rosenberg, described Reagan's podium style, he said, "There is a critical moment early in every Reagan speech when his physical presence begins to eclipse his words – when you begin watching more and hearing less – feeling more and thinking less. Look and mood completely take over."

"Think of the presenter and the audience as the beginning and ending points of all interpersonal communications; then think of the presenter as a transmitter and the audience as a receiver."

Nonverbal signals also played a decisive role in the widely televised 1960 presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Nixon's edginess, weak posture and shifty gaze sharply contrasted with Kennedy's focus, confidence and charm. The side-by-side comparison cost Nixon his lead in the polls and, eventually, the presidency.

"Think outside yourself; think outside your body, outside your hands and arms and eyes and voice, outside your story, outside your slides, outside your own mind."

Your first step is to establish empathy with the audience, but it must be the right form of empathy. If you are nervous at the podium, you will make the members of your audience feel uneasy. They will apply this negative feeling to whatever you say.

If, however, you act confidently, the audience will involuntarily feel good about you, and thus be more receptive to your message.

"Negative behavior, driven by the fear of public speaking and its attendant instinctive reaction, the fight-or-flight syndrome, creates negative perceptions in the audience."

Negative behavior at the podium results in negative audience perceptions. In contrast, a speaker's positive behavior inspires positive feelings among audience members.

Getting up in front of an audience to deliver your presentation is the ultimate "moment of truth." Numerous emotional reactions, such as the famous "fight or flight" syndrome, often conspire against the speaker at this crucial time. The heart pumps blood faster as the arms and legs become ready for action, either combat or escape. Respiration goes into overdrive. Of course, such physiological reactions work against a poised and powerful presentation. They often result in numerous involuntary physical actions, which the audience perceives as negative. The speaker's eyes move rapidly back and forth in a furtive manner. The hands wrap together defensively. The voice lowers and grows weak, sounding monotonous and boring.

"Organize your content so that it is relevant, focused and has a logical flow."

For any speaker, this is an unpleasant combination of physical actions and reactions. However, you won't experience this kind of panic if you are well-prepared. The following seven steps will help you plan and prepare the most effective presentation:

1. **“Establish the framework”** – Weigh your objective, your “call to action,” against the makeup of your audience. Consider your audience’s stand “point A” and your objective “point B.” Persuasive communication centers on the movement from point A to point B.
2. **“Brainstorm: Consider all the possibilities”** – Write down all the information your presentation could include. Separate the good ideas from the bad ones, and the great ideas from the good ones. Organize the best concepts. Develop some primary themes.
3. **“Find a mnemonic device for your main themes”** – Ancient Roman orators used to deliver their lectures as they moved from one marble column to the next in the forum. Why? The wily speakers used the individual pillars as memorization aids: They assigned a primary point to each column. Develop your own mnemonic devices.
4. **“Provide a road map”** – Develop a “flow structure” (novelists and screenwriters term this the “story arc”) for your presentation. Tie the individual points and themes into a unified, organized whole.
5. **“Use visual aids”** – Make your graphics support your story arc. Unfortunately, many of today’s speakers focus on visual aids (particularly PowerPoint slides) as if they are the primary reason for their presentations. This is exactly backward. Use graphics sparingly. Do not let them dominate your speech.
6. **“Ownership: Don’t pass the buck”** – If you are speaking from material that someone else developed, such as a corporate speechwriter, being passionate is more difficult. Play an active role in preparing your take on the presentation.
7. **“Practice the right way”** – Rehearse the words of your speech over and over to discover how you want to emphasize and accent specific points. This will help you memorize your presentation or, at least, become deeply familiar with its primary concepts.

“Charisma Not Required”

Many people think that either you have what it takes to be a great public speaker or you do not. This is a fallacy. You can teach yourself to become a great presenter. Take former President Bill Clinton. In his own words, Clinton was an “unremarkable” public speaker in high school. Initially, even as an adult, he was little better. The media widely panned his speech nominating presidential candidate Michael Dukakis at the 1988 Democratic National Convention. *The New York Times* reported: “He plowed on through signals...to desist, through the frantic flashing of a red light in front of him, through the gestures of many in the front rows, who drew their index fingers across their throats in the broadcast symbol for ‘cut it short.’” Yet, through hard work, Clinton eventually became a masterful speaker. In recent years, he has earned \$10 million annually giving speeches.

“The Mental Method of Presenting”

Like actors and athletes, presenters must concentrate. Focus on controlling the adrenaline that rushes through your system when you speak. One way to do this is to avoid scrutinizing yourself. Instead, survey the people in your audience. How are they reacting? What do they need to know? Learn to “think outside yourself” – your presentation is intended to move your audience, not to focus on you. Consider each audience member. Turning your attention away from yourself and toward the audience will help ease any nervousness you may feel.

“The challenge ... when you are in front of an audience is to re-create the conversational mode, the very mode in which most human beings are comfortable.”

At the same time, strive to be as “conversational” as possible. Get out of “presentation mode” and into “conversational mode.” Focus on one person from the audience. Do not “present” to that person, but rather “chat” with him or her. According to a Yale study, “you” is among the 12 “most persuasive words in the English language.” Therefore, plug the word “you” into your presentation wherever possible: “The reason this is important to you is ...” or “Let me show you.”

“Cadence in speech is the equivalent of rhythm in music.”

Great conversationalists take their cues from the people with whom they are speaking, and so do great public speakers. Is someone in the audience smiling at you or nodding affirmatively at what you are saying? These are positive “interactions.” Does someone else have a puzzled expression? This interaction tells you to adjust your speech accordingly, explain more carefully and give examples. Skillful presenters know the value of perceiving the audience’s signals and adapting their speeches accordingly. In the end you want more heads nodding. When you achieve that, the butterflies in your stomach will fly away.

Speaking with Your Body

The fight-or-flight response translates to an involuntary “body wrap” posture at the podium. This defensive, constricted stance makes you seem uneasy. Connect to your audience by opening yourself up, and using your arms and hands to illustrate your points. Extend an open hand in friendship. Reaching out may feel unnatural at first, but, ironically, you will look comfortable to the audience. Use this gesture whenever you employ a “you” sentence. Doing so will reinforce the persuasiveness of your message.

“The essence of Reagan’s style was his uncanny ability to be completely at one with his audience in every setting, across every dimension, to make every person in every audience feel as if, ‘He’s speaking to me!’”

Eye contact is a good thing, but at the podium, “eye connect” is even better. When you begin any speech, slowly “sweep” the room with your eyes. As you get to your primary points, look your audience members in the eyes, one after another. Share affirming nods.

Be animated and passionate. Move back and forth on stage, going first toward one person in the audience, then toward another. As you walk, smile and speak with conviction. Monitor your cadence. Deliver a phrase to one person in the audience, then pause. Shift to another person and deliver a second phrase. Continue to repeat this process, but subtly, with individual audience members throughout your presentation.

Getting Graphic

Synchronize each section of your presentation with your slides or other graphics. Keep them as simple as possible. Complex or confusing images can overpower your important message. To keep things clear, use “closure statements” about the slides you show. For example, “These pie charts demonstrate that our primary market is now substantially stronger than it was three years ago.”

“The problem is that nobody knows how to tell a story. And what’s worse, nobody knows that they don’t know how to tell a story.” (Don Valentine)

Do not make the mistake of facing your graphics while you speak. Keep your eyes on the people listening to you to avoid three major problems: turning away from the audience, muffling your voice and reading slides line-by-line. Your presentation should not focus on your graphics, but on the particular message you want to convey. Too many presenters pay so much attention to their graphics that their slides become the stars of their presentations. Use them merely as visual notes to support your message.

“There are two types of speakers: those who get nervous and those who are liars.” (Mark Twain)

As you move through your slides, work with a wireless microphone and wireless remote control. Get out from behind the lectern, though hiding there may be tempting. Position yourself with the screen on your left to make Western audiences, whose members read from left to right, more comfortable. To enable audience members to look easily from you to the screen, stand close to it. Keep your arms and hands (and other body parts) out of the projection beam. Your audience members should focus on your presentation instead of being distracted by the odd patterns the light from the projector creates on your body when you inadvertently become part of the screen.

“The Power Presentations Pyramid”

Think of your presentation as a pyramid with five parts. At the base is your story, which must be focused and compelling. The next tier up represents your supporting graphics – with emphasis on “supporting.” This is followed by your style of delivery, as you speak to “one person at a time.” How you present your graphics is the next layer of the pyramid, called “tools of the trade.” At the apex of the pyramid is the question-and-answer portion of your presentation, which you must be able to handle with competence and credibility. Manage each element well to win over your audience.

About the Author

Jerry Weissman has coached hundreds of IPO presentations. *Fortune* magazine named his book *Presenting to Win* as one of eight “must-read” titles.



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