

7 Tips for Powerful Sit-Down Presentations

By Dianna Booher

Whether it's answering an offhanded query, "How's the project going?" or selling your ideas for conducting a new employee survey, every presentation you make is an opportunity to establish an executive presence and move up in your organization. Consider these tips for improving both the substance and style of your next presentation so that you can speak up with confidence and authority.

Don't "Let Down" for Sit-Down Presentations

In a business setting, you may make presentations to only a few people seated around a conference table or desk. Although there is no correlation between audience size and importance of the outcome, consider several issues in light of the informal setting.

First, consider the group's expectations. Do not assume that because the audience is small, its members do not expect a formal presentation—visuals and the works.

Second, because you are seated around a desk or table—at eye level with the group—you must convey your enthusiasm, assertiveness, and authority at "half mast," through your facial expressions, posture, and voice. Sitting down may tempt you to slouch, but don't. Sit comfortably erect, leaning slightly forward in your chair to show attentiveness and enthusiasm for your subject. Sit back in your chair to convey openness to questions.

Position yourself to maintain eye contact with everyone in the room. Do not get stuck between two listeners so that you have to turn your head back and forth with each point, as though you are watching a game of table tennis. If possible, remove any physical obstacles that block vision or create "distance" between you and your audience.

Sitting down or standing up—decisions count either way.

Never Let Facts Speak for Themselves

Facts need interpretation. According to Mark Twain, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." If you don't believe this, tune in to the next political campaign. People can make facts and numbers mean almost anything. Interpret yours so that your listeners draw the same conclusions you intend.

Make Statistics Experiential

People digest numbers with great difficulty. Graphs and charts help. But if you can go beyond these common visuals, do so. For example, one manager speaking before his peers at IBM about his budget being cut dramatically yanked off his jacket to reveal his white shirt—with great big holes cut out of the sides and back. Amid the laughter, he made his point dramatically and memorably.

To demonstrate the cost of absenteeism to your organization, have your group complete a worksheet on "Employee Ed" who misses six days a month three times a year. Then

increase those absences per warehouse in each division as the audience calculates on their worksheets. The numbers will come alive as they themselves work with the changing results.

Use Metaphors, Similes, and Other Analogies to Clarify and Aid Retention

A *metaphor* is a word or phrase substituted for another to suggest similarity. For example: “My friend is my Rock of Gibraltar,” “Time is money,” “Kill that idea,” “That question will be the litmus test,” “This new product line will be our insurance policy against obsolescence.”

A *simile* compares two things with the actual words *like* or *as* in the analogy. Recently, I’ve heard business presenters use examples such as these: “Trying to process these data with your computers is like trying to mow your lawn with a pair of scissors”; “Your files are like athletic socks and dress socks; you don’t need both every day. Access should determine how you should store them”; “This new legislation before Congress is like throwing a nuclear bomb at an ant hill—and missing the ant hill.”

The more complex the idea, the more important it is to simplify and illustrate by comparison.

Use Analogies to Provide a Consistent Framework

Think how many times you have heard the functioning of the human eye and its parts compared to the working of a camera—an excellent analogy for clarifying a complex process. Or how often have you heard complex routers referred to as a telephone switchboard—with each part of the equipment explained as it compares to a small telephone system?

Probably the best-known analogies and allegories are Biblical parables and Aesop’s fables. “Concern over the unrepentant means leaving the 99 sheep to look for the lost one.” “The tortoise runs a slow but steady pace and crosses the finish line a winner.” Such visual or emotional analogies help audiences follow a lengthy presentation step by step.

Remember that Timing Indicates Emphasis

In general, a good rule of thumb for allocation of your overall time is to spend 10 to 15 percent of your time on the opening, 70 to 85 percent on the body, and 5 to 10 percent on the closing. This allows slightly more time up front in the introduction to grab attention, “win over” a hostile or uninterested group, and establish credibility than to close the presentation. If your presentation includes an involved action plan, that section most likely should be part of the body of your presentation, and your close should focus on the final persuasive push toward the decision to act.

On the other hand, you may discover that you need to cut. In doing so, always keep the audience’s preferences in mind. Think of your presentation as a roadmap. If your audience wants to take only interstate highways to their destination, do not pencil in all the farm-to-market roads along the way. This merely clutters the map. With regard to

information overload, as John Brockmann so aptly put it, “Most houseplants in the U.S. are killed by over-watering.”

Never Ramble on Past the Point of High Impact

Anything you say after your polished point of close dilutes your impact. Do not ramble on with anticlimactic drivel. Say it and stop.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of “21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century.” Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its “Top 100 Thought Leaders” and “Top 100 Minds on Personal Development.” www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.