



PRESENTING TO INSPIRE

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When presenting advice the support and commitment of the listening audience must be secured before progress can be made. Achieving this will generally require more than the smooth delivery of a few PowerPoint slides. Whether the target audience is large or small, consider the success factors that are required to drive a favorable outcome.

Prior to an important meeting, especially if you anticipate a skeptical or hostile audience, you may find yourself thinking: I have designed my presentation material, but what else will it take? How will I successfully engage my audience for the next 45 minutes and, more importantly, inspire them to act upon my recommendations?

The following pointers can help you to succeed in a broad range of presentation situations, to both colleagues and senior client executives alike. They consider simple, easy-to-implement practices in four specific areas:

- Setting the stage as a speaker

- Generating interest around the topic
- Crafting an audience engagement approach
- Handling questions and concerns

Setting the stage

To inspire and secure the commitment of others you will need to make a positive impact. One of the most underestimated aspects of any presentation is the speaker introduction, which should be well thought-out.

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The response from your audience will be based on two factors: the strength of your content and the credibility of the person presenting it. Clearly highlight the experience that you will draw upon to illustrate your topic. Don't rush through the introduction, and be personable in tone to position yourself as an interesting speaker.

Most important, be context-specific. If you have a presentation at 1pm to discuss changes in regulation, and another at 3pm to present risk management strategies, you will need to modify your introductory words to emphasize your credentials relative to each topic. Even if presenting to colleagues who know you well, make sure that you explain what makes you qualified to present on this subject.

An interesting topic?

Having earned your position on the stage you need to generate interest around the topic. Outline the main points that you intend to cover but, more important, explain why they are relevant to your audience. Weaving these things into a compelling set of introductory words is an art, and the key is to understand who your audience are and to connect to their reality. You may have established credibility as a speaker, but, when it comes to the topic, everyone will be asking themselves the same question: What's in it for me?

If the content of this article were to be presented to graduate students, for example, it might be appropriate to emphasize how the content could help them to progress successfully in their careers. Towards a senior management audience, on the other hand, introductory words might focus on the importance of engaging stakeholders when getting a new business venture off the ground. Real-world examples and references command a high level of attention, particularly those that refer to the perils of poor practice. A universal trait of humans is that we don't like to get our fingers burned. Statements such as 'many projects suffer as a result of their failure to quantify risks' therefore help to draw attention. Do make sure, however, that your presentation provides solutions to any dilemmas that you introduce.

Engagement is a two-way process

Prolonged periods of one-way communication are challenging both for a

speaker and the listening audience. In any live presentation you will need to include some form of interaction, and it is advisable to plan your principal interaction points in advance. The optimal approach will vary according to the structure of your material and the size of the group that you are addressing.

Try to make your first interaction early in the session

The benefit of working with smaller audiences is that you can really have a dialogue with them. Facilitate short discussions, and create additional momentum by inviting them to share their own examples to further illustrate your points. Presenting to larger groups lends itself to other techniques, such as polling (asking for a show of hands from those supporting an opinion), or allowing the audience to collectively respond to simple 'yes' or 'no' questions.

Try to make your first interaction early in

the session. This gives the signal that two-way communication is expected, and people will naturally pay more attention and be ready to respond. Keep in mind, however, that interaction takes time and your content and timing may need to be adjusted accordingly. Cultural overtones will also have an impact on your engagement approach as some cultures are more open to interaction than others.

Handling questions

Some presenters adopt the practice of deferring questions until a window at the end of their session. While this makes the presenter's job easier, it is a measure that should be avoided other than in exceptional situations, where the number of questions becomes unmanageable. This is for an important reason: your aim is to secure the commitment of your audience, but, until a listener's questions have been sufficiently addressed, they are unlikely to commit. "Challenging audiences may vocalize concerns and objections".

While good question handling requires preparation, it's usually better to encourage people to speak up, put forward their questions (which may also be lodged in the minds of others) and address them. This will secure commitment and increase the momentum around your topic.

Some of the most common ways to handle questions are to:

- Answer the question, being clear and concise in doing so
- Politely defer the question to a later point in your presentation, where it can be answered in a clearer context
- Take the question off-line, particularly if the answer is unlikely to be of interest to the wider audience

- Take an action item to look into an answer, if appropriate to do so
- Use your audience – ask others in the room to propose answers and facilitate a constructive discussion

Challenging audiences may vocalize concerns and objections

Challenging audiences may vocalize concerns and objections. The skill with which these are handled conveys a key part of a speaker's credibility.

- Be prepared. When planning a presentation always anticipate the most likely concerns, consider your approach

for handling them and prepare any additional support material that may be required. A professional presenter thinks ahead and avoids handling what could have been anticipated on the fly.

- Be ready for the unexpected! Always address concerns with a high level of professionalism, even if the concern seems unreasonable or cannot be resolved. Others in the audience observing the dialogue will respect you for this.

Try using some of the simple techniques shared in this article and see how they can contribute to your own performance next time you present to inspire.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Samir Parikh is a principal business consultant, practice manager, and consultancy CEO with over 25 years of industry experience. In 2000, Samir founded *SPConsulting* a global management consulting firm specializing in organizational strategy and change management.

With a track record of projects conducted in more than 50 countries the firm works closely with companies that are transforming into consulting-based organizations, delivering solutions and professional services in highly competitive environments.



FURTHER READING

Samir is the author of *The Consultant's Handbook*, published by John Wiley & Sons. This book provides a comprehensive guide for the practical implementation of consulting skills by professionals working in consulting and professional-services-related disciplines.

The book contains additional guidelines, examples and use-cases to support readers in implementation of consulting techniques, as well as practical tips and lessons-learned from real consulting engagements.