

# It's all in the presentation

*Really effective presentations are not the order of the day, here are seven simple steps anyone can take to make them better.*

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When a friend gave me a book on presentation skills, I had reason to be offended as he had heard me speak many times. Today, however, I am grateful that he did. It totally changed how I look at presentations, whether my own or those given by others. The main lesson was that most presentations can be significantly, even dramatically, improved by just following some simple guidelines.



## **Create Stakeholder Value**

What have you got to say to the audience? Why should they want to listen to you? Unless you are a pure entertainer and they listen just for the enjoyment of the moment, they will be wanting something in return for spending the time, and maybe also money, to listen to you. There is only one way for the listener and any other stakeholder – such as the speaker, sponsor or meeting owner – to get value back from the presentation. The listener has to do something afterwards that creates value to himself or any other stakeholder. It is not enough for the listener to feel or think something, that does not create value. It is not enough for the listener to learn something, learning on its own has no value. It is only what the listener does when he has learned, which creates value.

So the only thing that matters is what the listener will do afterwards. Something that he would not have done without attending the presentation. Any part of the presentation which does not contribute to such behaviour, is at best a waste of time and probably distracting from the key message. In his book *Presentation Zen* ([www.presentationzen.com](http://www.presentationzen.com)), Garr Reynolds suggests that when preparing the presentation you should ask yourself: "If the listener could only remember one thing (and you would be lucky!), what should it be?" I agree with Reynolds and would add; what would it make him do, and how would that create value to him or other stakeholders?



## Kill the bullets

Bullet points have gone out of fashion, but not without first having done a lot of harm, distracting the listener's attention from what the speaker has to say. The worst case is a long list

of bullet points presented at once, it is better when they are introduced one by one, but why use bullet lists at all? If your bullet point is not important enough to occupy a slide on its own while you talk about it – one bullet one slide – then it probably should not be included at all. When you have presented all the points, you may summarise and repeat, that is probably the only circumstance where a list of bullets is serving a useful purpose.

## The seven words rule

Words in general, not just bullets, are real presentation killers. The reason is simple, you could say it seems like a human design fault, but we are incapable of listening and reading at the same time. So when the audience reads the text on your slides, they don't listen to what you say. It is as simple as that. Text on slides really detracts attention from the presenter, and repeated studies have shown that the audience remembers less when the presenter supports his message with text on slides.

Garr Reynolds says maximum seven words per slide. If you need more words, make more slides, or use a picture instead

## Pictures are louder

It is an old cliché that a picture paints a thousand words, but it is true. What's more, neurologists have found that pictorial information is processed in a different part of the brain from language, so we can process information from pictures and listen to speakers at the same time! But just any picture will not do, there has to be a clear connection. A dramatic picture which is clearly related to your message works best as a 'memory hook'. Sometimes even a simple hand drawing will do the trick. However, websites like

Istockphoto.com, dreamstimes.com, flickr.com or Google image search, make it so easy to find good images to support the presentation that there really is no excuse. But please, don't fill your presentation with clip-art and irrelevant pictures, instead press Ctrl-B on your keyboard or 'Mute Picture' on the projector's remote control, and while the screen goes black the audience will give you, the speaker, their undivided attention.



"You're not allowed to use the sprinkler system to keep your audience awake."

## The 10-minute rule

If you are an engaging and entertaining speaker, how long can you hold the listener's attention? 10 minutes maximum. In fact, there is extensive neurological research that confirms that after 10 minutes, the mind starts to drift. It doesn't mean that the presentation needs to be less than 10 minutes, but the speaker somehow has to regain the interest of the audience every 10 minutes.

Look at Steve Jobs on YouTube, possibly the world's best presenter. Before 10 minutes are up, he shows a video, gives a demonstration, brings someone on stage, or something else to change the format of his presentation, re-engaging the listener every time.

## Time to think

We listen and we forget. Information enters our short-term memory and doesn't get processed into the long-term memory, which is necessary if we are going to use it later. The listener must actively process the information, for example by relating it to what he already knows, discussing with others, asking questions or making comments based on past experience.

Every presentation needs to include some time for reflection and discussion. The traditional questions and answers immediately afterwards, don't help much. Why not give the audience 10 or 20 minutes to talk among themselves first, sharing with each other how they may use what they have just learned in their jobs and preparing questions or comments to the speaker.

A good presentation format is called 4 x 20; 20 minutes presentation, 20 minutes discussion, 20 minutes questions and answers, and 20 minutes break.

## How to become a better speaker?

Of course, it takes much more than a few tricks, such as those above, to make you a world-class speaker. There are three elements to excellence in this field. First, the content of the presentation must be crafted effectively; the introduction, body and conclusion, the call to action, avoiding anything that distracts, repeating and summarising everything important. Second, the supporting slides must be effectively designed, including pictures, graphs and a

### *Quotes to remember*

- *"The listener has to do something afterwards which creates value to himself or other stakeholders"*
- *"The speaker has to regain the interest of the audience every ten minutes"*
- *"Every presentation needs to include some time for reflection and discussion"*
- *"One bullet per slide"*
- *"If you need more than 7 words, make more slides or use a picture instead"*
- *"Use a dramatic picture as a memory hook"*

few words that will support, and not distract from what the speaker has to say. Third, the stage performance of the speaker; pacing, voice projection, body language and involvement. There are many books on this subject, among the best are Garr Reynolds' Presentation Zen and Presentation Zen Design. There are also some good resource centres on the web, an excellent one is Andrew Dlugan's [www.dlugan.sixminutes.com](http://www.dlugan.sixminutes.com).



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**Event ROI Institute** is a partnership of consultants dedicated to making meetings and events achieve the objectives of their stakeholders. For more information go to [www.eventroi.org](http://www.eventroi.org).

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2. <http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-6507915-boring.php>
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