

Practise those presentation skills

SOFT SKILLS There is no escaping the presentation if you are a student or a working professional. **V Pradeep Kumar** elaborates on the art of making an effective presentation



The art of making a presentation is an essential soft skill for academic and career success. A presentation explains a subject or a theme to an audience, with the specific purpose of informing, convincing, or to form the background for a debate. Presentations have found wide applications in the academic environment, for case studies, projects, assignments, debates and lectures.

Key aspects of a presentation

The purpose of the presentation determines the communication process. For example, your presentation could be about a completed assignment; a case study that your team brainstormed; a summer project you completed. Accordingly, the purpose could be to inform, influence or persuade the audience. In other words, the purpose is, 'what you want your audience to do, after the presentation'. Your audience could be classmates, faculty members or your summer project supervisory team. While preparing the presentation, keep the profile of the audience in mind.

The common variants of presentations are lectures, interactive presentations, PowerPoint presentations, Q&A sessions, demos and workshops. The content of the presentation is about what you would like to tell the audience so that they do what you want them to do.

Preparations

The most extensively used presentation in the academic and business environment is a PowerPoint presentation. As a thumb rule, an hour's preparation may be required for five minutes of the presentation. Therefore, you will have to spend more time preparing the content than in presenting it.

■ **Structure:** Your thoughts should flow in a structured manner to achieve the desired objective. Preparing an outline of the presentation ensures that the content is in harmony with the subject. A standard structure includes content, background, subject, explanations, arguments, conclusion, and action. Initiating a Q&A at the end promotes audience involvement and acceptance.

■ **Content:** Present the content crisply, finding the right balance between content and the number of slides. In general, about 2-3 minutes are adequate for a slide with some interaction.

Quoting from research enhances credibility, and can have a positive influence. Conduct a thorough research to collect facts. Crosscheck internet sources for authenticity.

Slogans, quotations, statistics, data, analogy, metaphors, testimonials make presentations powerful. Introduce the theme/subject with a brief background, creating the right mood. Discuss alternatives, pros and cons, SWOT analysis, to make the presentation logical and com-

prehensive.

■ **Style:** Present the content creatively using the right elements of design, layout, colour and fonts.

Avoid clutter on slides. Don't go beyond 40-50 words per slide. Bullets are user-friendly ways to present information.

The late Steve Jobs said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication". His presentations were strikingly simple and visual with graphics and pictures that helped communicate powerfully. Use Apple's Keynote or PowerPoint SmartArt to add character and strength to your presentations.

Make the background and font colours appropriate and in harmony. Light backgrounds such as white, cream or pastel colours go well with black, brown etc. Keep text to the minimum in each slide, with font sizes of around 20. This will make for better visibility. It is advisable to use one standard font such as Times New Roman, Verdana, Calibri, or Arial. Antique and decorative fonts don't look good in a presentation and are not user friendly either. Do remember that upper and lower case enhances readability.

Using the right font and size, appropriate spacing, colours in harmony, and simple design templates, enhances the cognitive skills of the audience.

The art of delivering

Though effective public speaking doesn't come naturally to everyone, one can learn by following these simple principles.

■ **Practise:** Steve Jobs was a master speaker. He rehearsed for several hours for many days before an actual presentation. *Business Week* magazine, complimenting his presentation skills wrote,

“AN EFFECTIVE PRESENTATION DEPENDS ON ITS DELIVERY; EFFECTIVE DELIVERY DEPENDS ON PRACTISE ALONE. DON'T SPEAK IN FRONT OF THE AUDIENCE, BUT SPEAK TO THE AUDIENCE OBSERVING THEIR BODY LANGUAGE.

"His sense of informality comes after grueling hours of practise". In other words, the more you practise, the better you will be in presenting and the more you present, the better you keep getting.

■ **Stage presence:** With practise, comes self-confidence, enabling you to create an impressive stage presence. Take a deep breath for a few seconds when you are on stage. This will make you feel comfortable and help you focus on the presentation.

■ **Delivery:** The effectiveness of the presentation is in its delivery; effective delivery depends on practise alone. Don't speak in front of the audience, but speak to the audience observing their body language. It's a good analogy to think of an effective presentation akin to a flight take-off.

■ **Audience contact:** Maintain eye contact with your audience.

■ **Tone, tenor and accent:** Speak in your natural accent. Use tone and tenor appropriately to assert a point or to create the right environment.

■ **Beginning:** Think of an anecdote, humorous quote or an interesting experience to attract the audience's interest.

■ **Take off:** Once you get the interest of the audience, it's time to take off on the main subject. If you are a beginner or have a tendency to forget what to say next, use props.

■ **Smooth ride:** This is the heart of the presentation. Don't read from the slides, but use the points to elaborate. Use different tactics such as images, graphics, humour and aids such as handouts, audio, video etc. to take the audience into the same thought process as yours. Sustain the audience's involvement by inviting

clarifications or asking questions. When you make an important point, allow your audience to get clarity or reiterate the point.

■ **Landing:** Closer to the end, it's time to summarise the presentation, reiterating the purpose and recommending an action. Importantly, use persuasive language to ensure your audience is in harmony with your thoughts and are motivated to act.

■ **Q&A:** After the presentation, it's useful to have questions. Anticipate questions and keep answers ready. It's a good idea to keep additional material and facts to support or counter an argument.

At business meetings, you may often need to present the gist and not the complete presentation. Hence, prepare for such contingencies.

After every presentation, evaluate yourself. Dale Carnegie, the famous author of several self-help books said, "There are always three speeches, for every one you actually gave. The one you practised, the

one you gave, and the one you wish you gave". Keep evaluating your presentations to learn the art of making presentations.

I find many students reluctant and shy to interact with faculty. Preparing and delivering a presentation enhances your personality and self-confidence. Fine-tuning communication and grooming, enables you to get a job of your liking. Further, you should be able to apply those skills and share your knowledge with peers and subordinates in a work environment. This is critical for career growth. CEOs and HR experts concur that the most important skill is the ability to communicate.

Develop your presentation style and skill, with observation, understanding and practise. People expect to see a professional making a presentation; dress appropriately for the occasion. An effective presentation skill is the language of leadership, vital for a successful career. (The author is a career and management consultant.)