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# Line up a plan for planning your presentation content

**W**e need the pie charts this afternoon.” “Which pie charts?” “Ask Julie — she knows.” “This presentation is way too long.” “Do we really need to use their logo?” “Can I just grab one off their Web site?”

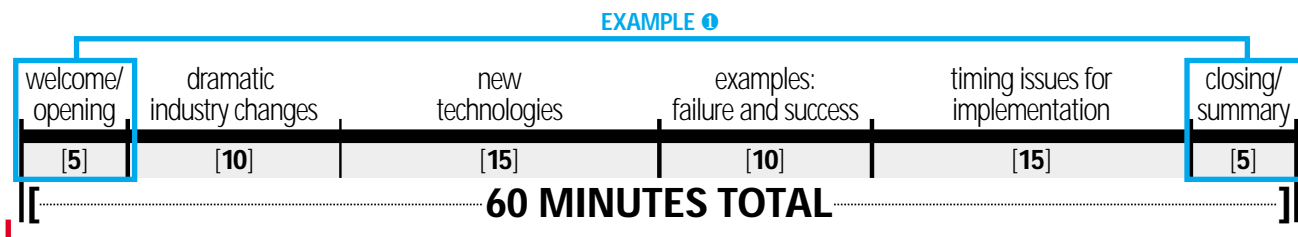
Similar conversations occur every day. I know, because I have been a part of hundreds of presentation planning sessions that

seemed more like Chinese fire drills than structured processes. If a process was in place at all, it was at best informal and inconsistent. Every presenter faces challenges during the planning process. The question is: Does a formula exist for putting together good presentation content?

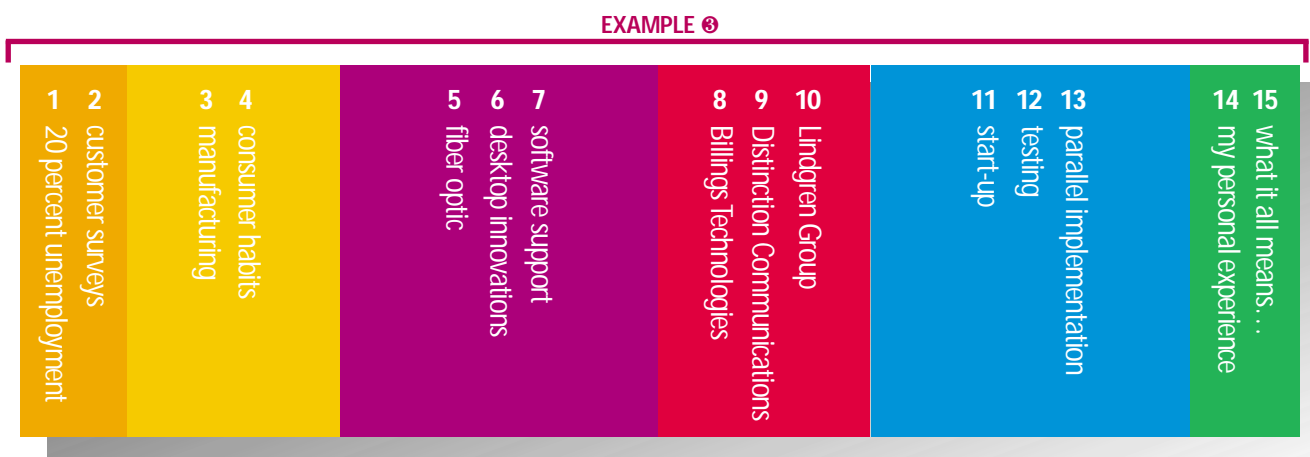
Conceptualizing your content is predominately a left-brain

process. Some of us create text outlines, some script the actual words and others collaborate on a whiteboard to flush out specific topics. The problem with these approaches is that they are entirely focused on words and text. To ensure your audience isn't put to sleep with slide after slide of bullet points, you need to find a way to tap into the right brain's cre-

## Example presentation timeline



**EXAMPLE ❷**



**EXAMPLE ❶**

Start by setting aside time for both an opening and a closing statement, within your total presentation time.

**EXAMPLE ❷**

Next, determine your major focus points and estimate the amount of time each point will take. Remember: Don't go over the time allotted for your presentation.

**EXAMPLE ❸**

Within the major points, fill in the details of what needs to be said. With the subpoints in place, you can now rehearse to determine how long each major point will take you.



ative nature when you plan your presentation.

One way to put more planning into your presentations is to create a visual timeline. By doing so, you map your thoughts more effectively and understand the flow of your presentation. It all starts by drawing a simple line.

### Define the timeline

Let's assume you're to give a 60-minute presentation. As much as you may want to stretch it to 70 minutes, don't. Staying true to the allotted time is a trust between presenters and audiences that shouldn't be broken. You don't want people to up and leave or to have your name become synonymous with long-windedness or soapboxing do you? Be certain to include time for introductions, interaction during the presentation and a Q & A period afterward.

Begin mapping the timeline by adding opening and ending segments and assigning the proper amount of time for each (see **EXAMPLE 1**). Don't consider this filler time. The opening few minutes establish context and relevance for your audience, setting expectations, interest and credibility. Your closing statements should do the same. Often, closing statements are rushed and unprepared, but the closing is where all the pieces converge to drive home the point of the previous 60 minutes. No matter what happens during the presentation, don't cheat your audience out of a well-rehearsed closing summary.

### Add major messages and detail

To allocate your time accordingly, defining the major messages of your presentation is essential. When you carefully choose the presentation's important messages, its road map will start to take shape (see **EXAMPLE 2**). Because we are visually oriented creatures, a visual timeline with tangible constraints is a more practical way of understanding the information flow. When this framework is established, you can adjust the

time frame of individual sections, but *not* the overall length.

After naming individual time frames, you can begin to fill in the details for each point (see **EXAMPLE 3**). Often when we practice an entire presentation and discover it's running several minutes too long, we're clueless about where to begin editing our words. Since you've already allotted time to each main topic area, you can now rehearse the subpoints to learn whether you're within your time budget.

Keep in mind that it's crucial you don't exceed the total allotted time. Perhaps you find that topic A takes more time than you have, but every other topic has been cut as far as possible. Do you think you can speak a little faster to somehow squeeze it all in? It hasn't worked for business presenters during the last hundred years, so it's likely not to work for you either. Reduce topic A's content, stick to your timeline and don't try to scavenge for time that doesn't exist.

### Create a graphics plan

This critical final step is frequently omitted from presentation planning or mixed into the process with little thought — much to the detriment of your audience's sanity. Think about what appropriate visual reinforcements would be helpful. Don't fill your presentation with images for the sake of having visuals. Even if it's a bullet-point slide, consider what graphic relief will build context for the words. Cute clip art won't suffice.

Audiences quickly recognize filler vs. relevant imagery. **EXAMPLE 4** shows how to use the timeline's subpoints to produce a list of the slides and graphics needed for each major topic section.

Although this timeline method is helpful, it's important that you don't fix what isn't broken. In other words, if your presentation process is working, don't change it. If your process has been lacking in usefulness for some time, though, give the timeline a try.

In an age when we are required to plan business acquisitions, major account strategies, Web-site layouts and marketing deployment, we can not afford to plan our presentations inadequately. Maybe it's time to take a closer look at your development process. As Henry Ford once said, "Getting ready is the secret to success." ■

### EXAMPLE 4

#### List of graphics needed

- 1 Need new custom template for entire presentation — reflect new corporate identity.
- 2 Use small customer survey form graphic bottom right.
- 3 Need picture from production floor — assembly line.
- 4 Source picture of consumers shopping.
- 5 Source stock fiber-optic image.
- 6 Show new Sony flat-panel display.
- 7 Use small picture of software box in corner.
- 8 Need clean logo, Billings Technologies.
- 9 Need clean logo, Distinction Communications.
- 10 Need clean logo, Lindgren Group.
- 11 Show process flow-chart graphic. extend to start-up phase.
- 12 Expand graphic to show testing phase.
- 13 Expand graphic to show parallel implementation phase.
- 14 Title only, my story.
- 15 Summary screen — pull in relevant images already used in presentation.

### EXAMPLE 4

With the presentation's subpoints in place, the final step is writing down what graphics are needed to accentuate your words.