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Presentation TIPS from the Past and Present

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

Would you persuade, speak of interest, not of reason.

--Benjamin Franklin

We certainly have some unique advantages over presenters of yesteryear. It's hard to imagine trying to get across a critical message without the aid of a laptop computer, XGA projector and some software that shoehorns our ideas into the computer. Despite the technological edge we have today, I actually think things were much easier back then. The only thing that moved and made noise in the presentation was the presenter. There was nothing to hide behind. Presenters lived and died on the impact of their messages.



One of my best fishing buddies is a psychologist and one of his strongest influences in my life over the years has been in helping me understand the "why" behind the "what" in good presenting - why presentations carry so much more audience impact when we leverage more sensory-based imagery in our presentations. Appealing to an audience's right brain processing functions during a presentation is not just interesting psychobabble, it also carries with it the keys to moving an audience to action and being truly more persuasive and memorable.

Benjamin Franklin made a similar observation when he challenged us not to appeal to **"reason"** if we want to be persuasive. In today's context, reason generally looks like screens of matter-of-fact bullet slides. Reason is framed in a dozen busy charts and graphs intended to take an audience to a decision (whether they're ready or not). Reason is fashioned out of columns of tabular spreadsheet data. Don't get me wrong, there's a place for those things in moderation but reason is rarely the compelling stimulus behind shifting an audience's belief system or moving an audience to take the next step towards purchasing a product, service or company. So, if reason alone is not the key, what is? **Interest**. compelling, paradigm-challenging content that connects with the emotional side of our internal thinking processes. If you don't seem to be able to find the "right-brain" template in your PowerPoint slide layout menu, perhaps I can help.

As I prepare for the Presentations 2002 conference and the Presentation Survival School that I will lead again this year, I'm constantly faced with having to live out this stuff. (That's the challenge with presenting about better presenting. Your wisdom is put to the test as the words roll off your lips.) Here are a few words of wisdom that just might help in your next presentation and mine.

Don't say in words what you can show and tell in images and story

This is always a very tough hurdle for most presenters. Text has always been the default communication vehicle of choice for letters, emails and printed material and now you're being told you need to learn how to communicate, in part, in a different language. This "bi-lingual" requirement is a necessity for all those who want to design and deliver better presentations. Augmenting the easy with the meaningful (related photographic imagery; pictures of software boxes or menus, your assembly plant, customers using your product, a picture of that #1 customer along side their quote or an embedded video of the industry expert talking about your market segment) is a huge but much needed leap. These are the elements that create interest and engage an audience.

During the Survival School, Dr. Scott Lee and I have the challenge of communicating a broad range of presentation concepts to a diverse audience in ways they will remember. In one segment, audience members will be interacting with some beach balls; in another they will share their own experiences (mainly right brain activity for them and the rest of the audience). The use of a video clip from a recognizable classic movie will illustrate an important presentation concept. All along Scott and I will be sharing related personal stories that underscore key themes. The challenge then becomes creating strong connectivity between the visual and spoken image and the concept. A gratuitous attempt at using interesting but marginally relevant stuff on screen will miss the mark (albeit in a more interesting fashion.)

Summarize using visual hooks back to key concepts

At the conclusion of each session, we will be summarizing what we talked about. Those summarization slides will also include a single image that we had used earlier creating instant connectivity back to that concept. The combination of verbal reinforcement, visual reinforcement and text reinforcement is the stuff from which long-term memory is built. When you create your presentation, don't think of the use of a slide graphic as always a standalone component but rather reintroduce some of those key visuals in your conclusion as sensory-based hooks back to key concepts.

It's great when we can look back in history and find someone famous who supports our point of view but it always brings up the question of relevance. Maybe their concepts were much more simplistic and didn't require the same type of visual support. If Thomas Jefferson had PowerPoint in 1776, I can just envision his presentation to the delegates in Philadelphia on a hot July afternoon. "Today, (first bullet slides in) we're going to take on the preamble and later this afternoon (second bullet flies in) we will try to cover the articles to the constitution. He then projects the entire first draft of the Declaration of Independence on screen while Sam Adams and Thomas Paine roll their eyes in the front row. "Put on the coffee", Sam whispers. Then Benjamin Franklin steps to the podium. He shares his passion for freedom and what an independent and free society may look like. The delegates lean forward in their seats. What the concept of freedom lacked in symbols at the time, it made up for with hopes and dreams. The most interesting thing about wisdom is that it stands the test of time. It never goes out of style but bubbles to the surface in fresh expressions.

The very best leaders, almost without exception and at every level, are master users of stories and symbols.

--Tom Peters

Author and contemporary management consultant

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