

# Raising The Bar On Your Presentations And Your Career

*How to hone your public speaking skills and engage an audience.*



*Margo T. Krasne  
President  
Speak Up*

Can you remember the last time you sat enthralled through a business presentation — invigorated and impelled to action? More likely, you kept your eyes front, but your thoughts back at your desk, or on your weekend escape plans — or simply on an escape from the presentation itself. And where do you think your audience goes when you're in front of the room? Do they stay with you and your message, or do those glassy eyes tell another story? It boggles the mind to think of all the time and money companies spend on presentations, not to mention what it costs to gather a group together, only to have the group leave, if not in body, in spirit.

Considering that most careers advance or recede in direct relationship to one's ability to present effectively, you'd think we would do better. Yes, there are those people whose fear of public speaking leads them to take

backroom jobs in an effort to avoid giving presentations. (Jerry Seinfeld supposedly said that at a funeral, most people would prefer to be in the coffin than delivering the eulogy.) However, most of us find that whether we like it or not, presentations go with the job. Sadly, few like it, and even fewer are really good at it. But their dislike is often not due to a fear of public speaking. At a certain point in a career, after we've had enough presentations under our belts, the fears recede or disappear entirely.

It is not the fear that deadens most presentations, but deadly presentations.

---

## **Word slides do not assist your audience — they distract your audience from you and your message**

---

So why aren't presentations better? One reason is that in an attempt to give poor presenters a leg up, the bar gets lowered. This began when companies bought into a study concluding that a poor presenter with slides could do just as well as a good presenter without slides. But here's the study's problem: The participants were asked to judge the presenters based on video tapes of the presentations, rather than being treated to a live presentation, in which the good speaker engaged and interacted with the audience — from this highly flawed study we began using overheads, slides, and now PowerPoint, and we forgot that what makes a presentation come to life: A presenter who cares about his or her audience. (By the way, the study was conducted by the University of Minnesota and sponsored by the

3M Company — need I say more?)

Word slides, and presenters who serve up what an audience can read for themselves, do not a presentation make. (I hate to think what would have happened to the Civil Rights movement if Martin Luther King had written and delivered "I Have A Dream" in PowerPoint.) Word slides do not assist your audience — they distract your audience from you and your message.

It compares to someone handing you something to read, and then talking to you while you're trying to do the very thing they asked you to do. Want to kill them? Do not think that an audience views a speaker with slides with any more benevolence. It takes a lot of concentration to listen to a speaker and decipher slides at the same time. Speakers who rush through to "get it over with" only add to the problem. Now the audience has to work even harder. And speakers who read from slides demean their audiences' intelligence. Audiences know how to read, and most of us prefer to read at our own pace. Good speakers take care of their audience; they do not expect the audience to take care of them. (Did you know that almost all the studies on which we base our business models were performed on MBA students? I am not saying that MBA students aren't bright, but their focus is different. Business meetings are intended to build consensus or impel an action forward; they are not meant to prepare the attendees for an exam.)

### **So how do You Create an Engaging Presentation?**

1) Start with your audience. Ask yourself: What's their reality? What do they want, need, and care about? Decide on an action you want your audience to take with the information

you give them. Then strategize your presentation around where your audience is coming from, where you want them to go, and how you plan to get them there.

2) Plot your story line. A good story moves the listener forward, so know where you're going and map the stops you need to make to get you there. (Do NOT follow the old dictum, "Tell them what you're going to say, say it, and then tell them what you've said," — it's a recipe for boredom.) Or to mix metaphors, think of a presentation as a fantastic meal. First comes the appetizer that whets our appetite; next, a great main course that almost, but not quite, fills us up so that we can still look forward to a sumptuous dessert. And remember that great meals do not overload but allow you to leave feeling energized and sated.

3) Speak the speech aloud. We do not speak the way we think, and unless we're great dialogists, we don't write the way we speak. I've watched great conversationalists turn robotic when speaking from a written script or trying to translate from PowerPoint to plain English. (And have a heart: If you need an agenda, put it on the table — literally. I don't know about you, but when the waiter comes with that list of specials, my eyes glaze over.)

4) Choose visuals. Only when you have a well-constructed story line, one that moves your story along and connects one point to another, then, and only then, decide what visuals you need to make the presentation come to life. You might find that you don't need slides at all — a picture might do or an animatic. You might decide to write on a flip chart or combine mediums. Or, you might do as many of the best speakers do: pick a few fabulous visuals to be used at the perfect moment to drive home the point.

Remember: A turned on presenter is the best visual aid.

Speaking of best speakers, they almost all take a best practices approach to speaking, i.e., they practice and rehearse. I make the distinction because we don't need a specific presentation to practice our skills. Skills can be honed on a daily basis. For instance, if you're weak on eye contact or if you don't really see the people to whom you're speaking; or if you don't know how to move in an apparent random fashion around the room, or if you tend to dart back and forth between people, or stare off into space — you can practice with friends or in internal meetings. If your voice is weak, or your enunciation is sloppy, get a voice coach. If you don't know what to do with your hands, stand in front of a mirror and try out different gestures. Imitate those speakers whose hand movements you admire and eventually you'll make the gestures your own. (Do not practice your eye contact in front of a mirror, because once you're in front of a real audience, your best friend will no longer be there.)

**Your audience has a right to expect that you've done the necessary work before you get up to present, not during the presentation**

5) Rehearse. I cannot stress enough the benefits of rehearsal — the most important of which is not subjecting your audience to your stumbling and fumbling through speech. Verbalizing a complete thought takes work, especially since we think in snippets, not in

sentences. That's the reason you can find yourself in front of a client groping for words when you were convinced you knew exactly what you planned to say. Your audience has a right to expect that you've done the necessary work before you get up to present, not during the presentation.

The more you rehearse, the better you become. Really. How often have you repeated a personal story only to find it gets better with the telling? With each telling you've learned where to pause for the reaction and how to turn the phrase so that you get the reaction you want. Of course, there can be moments in the rehearsal process when you begin to sound stale. So stop and take a break before beginning again. (Tip: Asking different people to attend rehearsals helps keep you fresh — just be sure they know who they're playing and what you're trying to achieve so they can be constructively critical.)

Rehearse the opening — I don't mean just the words. There's an art to taking center stage and it's just as much of the rehearsal process as rehearsing the speech itself. When you get to the words, please don't start with "We're here today to. . ." Your audience knows what day it is and why they're there. Be more creative — hint at what awaits. Tell them why they need to hear your message, or simply start with a call to action.

There are huge payoffs to treating your audience the way you would wish to be treated, not the least of which is that a presentation that's engaging to listen to, is extraordinarily exciting to give. So, be a hero. Save your company money and move your career in a positive direction. Raise the bar on your next presentation — the result will be more than worthwhile. ■