5 Critical Mistakes to Avoid When Giving a Presentation

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Are you tired of sitting through boring presentations? I know I am. With all the attention on business communication, you might think that individuals would pay more attention to creating engaging presentations. After all, presentations help close deals, pitch ideas, get us noticed and so much more. So, why isn't there more emphasis on presentation content and delivery skills?

Unfortunately, some consultants and trainers focus on being a slick presenter and downplay the significance of rich content. It's all about the flash, and many simply don't know how to choose and structure content. Others focus on content but don't stress how critical it is to deliver it effectively. Some people are simply afraid to get up and be vulnerable in front of even a small audience, let alone a huge room.

I am Greek and love to share how glossophobia, the fear of public speaking, comes from two Greek words. "Glossa" means tongue, and "Phobos" means fear. Put them together, and you have one of the most common phobias, even more common than the fear of death. People literally will do anything to avoid presenting. Fake sickness. Concoct unbelievable excuses. Pass up opportunities for advancement. All because they cannot conquer the anxiety of public speaking.

To be effective, you must have both compelling content and be a dynamic speaker. Over the years, I have developed a list of common mistakes and how to overcome them. Here are my top five.

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1. Muddy messages

One of the reasons that presentations are boring is that there is no clear reason for the presentation. There is just a lot of "stuff" that the presenter dumps on the audience. You must take the time to think about what the audience needs to hear, boil it down to two to three messages and provide examples to clarify the key points. To overcome this mistake, start by creating an outline. Check to be sure the content flows logically. Get rid of anything that does not support the main points.

Think in soundbites. These are short, complete thoughts that give the listener a "bite" of content. Soundbites force you to be concise and precise, not muddy. The best soundbite is attention-grabbing and memorable.

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2. Tricky timing

Presenters can fall prey to trying to present too much content for the time allotted. I have seen presenters try to cram an hour of content into twenty minutes. They rush through the presentation to get it all in. This increases their anxiety and stresses the audience. The cure for this is to always start with the allotted time and then consider how much information can be absorbed during that time. Pacing is important. Try recording yourself and listen back. It is easy to hear when the pace is rushed. Stop and breathe. Do not feel the need to fill up every pause.

One more note. Less is more. You don't need to do long-winded

presentations. If someone offers you twenty minutes and you need fifteen, don’t try to stretch it. For those who struggle with the fear of speaking, taking on shorter presentations can build confidence. The more you get up and present, even for short periods, the easier it becomes.

3. Death by PowerPoint

We have all seen presenters talk to their PowerPoint and completely ignore the audience. Are they afraid to look at people? Do they not know the content? Have they overloaded the slide with text, written out every sentence and then proceeded to read it? This makes for terrible visuals and poor delivery. The audience is dying for the presentation to be over. The visuals should never be the focus. They should be designed to support the message. The cure for this is to limit the text to three to four key points. Never write out full sentences. Use the notes section to prompt you. If using graphics or photos, make them bold and simple. Finally, do you really need a PowerPoint? Maybe not. Don’t be afraid to do without visuals.

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4. Memorizing

When crafting a presentation, you want to find the ideal words and make it as interesting as possible. You write it down, rewrite it and then practice it repeatedly. People believe that memorization helps them deliver the perfect presentation. The problem is that rote memorization can backfire. If you forget a key point or perhaps miss a word, your brain freaks out.

I have seen people freeze on stage because they are trying so hard to remember that perfect phrase. When they cannot, they shut down. Real people don’t speak or present flawlessly. Everyone makes a little blunder here or there. It is natural,

so why do we seek perfection? It is far better to have bullets of content to guide you. Yes, practice, but experiment with different ways of presenting the material. It never comes out the same way twice. That is what makes it interesting and dynamic. If you are not confident, use memorization sparingly. Try memorizing the opening lines and the closing. That will get you started and help you end on a strong note.

5. Lack of energy

You know it when you see it. A person who loves what they do and is excited to share information. Too often, presenters have no energy. Facial expression is poor. Body language screams, “I would rather be somewhere else.” The voice is monotone and lacks presence. According to studies, only 7% of a message comes from words. The rest is communicated by body language and tone of voice- often known as nonverbals.

What are you unknowingly saying to the audience? Some people are more naturally energetic, but everyone can present with enthusiasm. To overcome a lack of energy, be sure you are rested and hydrated. Get off the auto-pilot and pay attention to the room. Without enthusiasm and sincerity, the message gets lost. Honestly, if you can’t be excited about the opportunity, maybe someone else should be out front.

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