

Improve your presentation skills

For most people, even high flying executives, speaking in public is most people's biggest fear, ranking higher than death. Knowing that your nerves are getting in the way of a powerful performance can pile up the pressure even higher, so how do you break the vicious circle?

Of course, practising the real thing is the best way to boost confidence and improve performance. There is no substitute for putting in the hours, but until those hours have been built up, anxiety busting tactics could prove invaluable.

1.) Be yourself and sell that to the audience

Be naturally yourself, whether it's a one to one presentation or one to 10,000. People will 'buy' you first and only listen to your message if you've sold yourself well. Selling yourself means building a rapport with the audience, and one of the easiest ways to do it is to ask a relevant and thought provoking question at the start.

2.) Use visual aids but avoid death by PowerPoint

People remember more of what they hear and see, compared to what they only hear, so do whatever you can to graphically illustrate your talk. Don't fill your visuals with words, instead have images without words, or just very brief points.

One of the worst mistakes presenters make is putting everything into their PowerPoint slides or course packs. If people are reading what you are saying they will want one of you to shut up. So write some words but not all of them. Leave answers to questions blank, so they're waiting for you to tell them. Think of you and your PowerPoint slides as the Two Ronnies, you shouldn't both be saying the same thing at the same time.

3.) Rehearse the scary bits

Practice walking up and standing in the space that you'll present from until you feel easy about it. Stand in front of an imaginary audience and then stand in front of a real group of people but without saying anything. It's important to stand there until you are comfortable because that's the worst thing that can happen, getting up there and not having any words.

4.) Know your objective

Decide from the start what you want the audience to do after hearing you. Prepare your talk around this objective, leaving out every point that doesn't help towards your goal, and keep it in mind during the event.

5.) Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce

The audience is only going to remember 10% of your presentation 24 hours later, so make sure they remember the right 10% and what they're supposed to act on. People have the best retention of what's said at the beginning and end of a presentation. They also remember things that are repeated and any outstanding points, so make sure you say each of your key points in each of the four different ways.

6.) Don't panic

Presenters worry and focus so much on remembering the content that the delivery suffers. The other problem with focusing on the content of your presentation is that your body language suffers and becomes unnatural or poor, thus making your message less believable. The audience isn't checking your presentation against a script, you won't be hounded out for not getting it word perfect, so concentrate on the delivery, not the precise words.

7.) Visualise success

Prior to stressful events people tend to have negative images or pictures in their mind about how they are going to cope, or to be more accurate, not going to cope. This imagery can be replaced with something more positive. The trick is to think about the aspects of the situation you're most worried about, decide on ways to deal with them, for example, how you're going to handle difficult questions, and then slowly picture yourself coping with each anticipated difficulty as it arises. Then keep practising that positive imagery prior to the event.

8.) Keep it short

People have a limited attention span, so don't go on too long so that means doing some planning in advance. The more experienced you are at presenting, the more tempting it is to think that you can just wing it, but if you don't plan it's easy to put too much in. Over running is plain bad manners and the audience will take a dim view of it. For every second you go past the allotted time, you are fast disappearing in the interest of the audience.

9.) Make the message stick

Nerves are not the only barrier to a powerful delivery. Even confident presenters can fluff the message if they ignore some key realities about presentations and human nature.

10.) Relax and be happy

Think of something happy before starting your presentation. Virtually all communication is selling and people tend to buy from happy people, not miserable ones.

11.) Breathe

Slowing your breathing combats the physical symptoms of nerves.

12.) Give the audience what they need

You need to know where the audience are coming from so you need to look at the subject, and perhaps also yourself, from their point of view. If it doesn't pass the audience's "so what" test, the chances are it won't be a successful presentation.

Imagine you're sitting in the audience yourself. What would make you think that sitting still for this presentation had been really worth it? It's especially important to keep the message audience focused at the start. If you're talking about Microsoft Word, don't mention Word in the first few minutes, Say "I'll show you how to save time writing letters". Then, when you've got their attention you can talk about Word as much as you like.

A common mistake of presenters is to get carried away and "forget to ensure that the audience is still with you", so keep the audience's needs in mind throughout the event.

Answering questions from the floor

One of the aspects of public speaking that strikes fear into many hearts is the prospect of difficult questions. Honestly admit if you don't know the answer, then say that you will find out by a certain time in the future and get back to them.

A different way to approach it is to turn the question around and ask if anyone in the audience knows the answer, which also has the advantage of involving them. However, if you don't know the answer yourself, then you've no way of knowing if the answer you get from the audience is correct.

If someone asks you "what do I do with...?" try replying "what would you do without them?". The worst thing is standing there for 30 minutes talking and nobody saying anything. Questions are a good thing and great presenters get the audience involved straight away. Nervous presenters just talk for 30 minutes, and that's even harder to do.

REMEMBER!!!

The audience is on your side!!! People actually want you to do a good presentation. They might expect it to be bad because they've seen so many bad ones, but they want it to be good. If you engage with them right at the start, and give them a few good things to hold onto, they will be with you all the way.