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How to Give a Presentation that 'Wows'

Never turn away an invitation to give a presentation about your firm, your services or your products. In the marketplace of ideas, presentations are coin of the realm.

A well thought-out presentation can inform, persuade and issue a call to action. In fact, it's easily one of the best market positioning opportunities you could ask for. It's also a great opportunity to sell yourself – in-person, real world, real-time. The challenge is to give a presentation that wows.

How do you do that? Before you put a word to paper, the first rule is to know your audience. It's not enough to say that everyone sitting in the room will be a prospect. What kind of prospect? How do they relate to your product? If you're presenting at an industry conference, ask the event organizer for a profile of attendees: their interests, occupations, professional designations.

Everyone has a preferred method for building a presentation. Mine is to reverse engineer it. First, decide what you want the takeaway to be – what are the two or three things you want people to remember?

Next, build a case around those messages, fleshing it out as you go along. This is an industry that loves statistics and performance records, but use anecdotes and illustrations as well. Graphics can simplify your message without dumbing it down. Make it visual – but also keep it real. Tell me, for example, why your fund is especially well-suited for my employees, and, this is key: *Make sure you communicate to me that you understand who my employee is.*

A presentation should have an introduction, a middle that tells the story and an end. Pretty obvious, right? Too often, I've found, people jump right to the middle without teeing up their comments.

I'm also a big believer in bullet points, quick hits that can help you organize your thoughts and frame your points. To my way of thinking, four silver bullets are better than a machine gun.

You want to present your material as if you own it. For that reason, I recommend rehearsing it and timing it. The point isn't to memorize your comments. If you do, you'll be sure to lose your way. Guaranteed. Plus, your presentation is likely to sound wooden. The objective is to become as familiar as you possibly can with your material.

Although, I'm not a fan of cue cards, it's okay to have notes with bullet points that you can lean on, but only if you need them. What you want, is to give a genuine and heartfelt presentation. And, you want it to be as seamless as possible.

Many people use PowerPoint today – and that's fine. But don't let the projector become the star, and by no means, rely solely on it. Technology can and often does break down. Plus, people tend to have a higher regard and appreciation for the spoken word when well-delivered.

Also, don't let a fear of public speaking influence you. There's this great Seinfeld routine in which the comedian notes that if given a choice, the guy called on to give the eulogy at a funeral would probably rather trade places with the guy in the casket. Now come on, it's not that bad. We've trained hundreds of professionals at StreetSpeak, and I can tell you that the only people who are really going to know how nervous you are, are the ones you tell. More often, jitters are mistaken for enthusiasm. Just remember to look your audience in the eye and to smile.

One of people's biggest fears is that they will forget to say something they think that's clever or especially well put. You know what? The world is not going to miss that comment. And, don't worry either about losing your place. Again, 99% of the time, the only person who's going to know you've lost your train of thought is you – unless you tell your audience, something too many speakers do.

At the end of your presentation, it's imperative to reiterate the bullet points that inform the audience about your firm and persuade the audience to take a position, buy your product, take that next step. What you don't want to do is bring people to the precipice and just leave them there.

A lot of people will give hand-outs about the presentation after it's over. I prefer to do that in advance because it allows people to take notes or reinforce the points I'm making as I go along. I also prefer to take questions at the end. Most sales presentations are a conduit for dialog and that means establishing a rapport with your audience and then having a conversation.

Also, anticipate what the questions might be, especially if there is a sensitive subject that you'd rather not address. Be ready for hard ball. In fact, if you haven't given a presentation in a while or are interested in moving to the next level, you might consider participating in an executive presentation workshop to sharpen your skills.

Here's a final tip: If you can, try to schedule your presentation first thing in the morning, or at least before lunch when people are still fresh. You don't want to be called up to speak at four in the afternoon. If you are, make sure the doors are locked. The last thing you want is to find yourself standing between your prospects and Happy Hour.

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