

Creating Winning Presentations

By Karen Newquist, CPCC, ACC

Think back to a specific presentation you've attended. It might be a seminar, a training class, a motivational speech, or even a small meeting with colleagues. How would you rate the speaker's presentation using these Levels-of-Effectiveness categories?

Over-The-Top (Excellent). I was engaged from the beginning. The presentation was clear, concise, and motivating. Long after the presentation was over, I can remember the key points. I was moved to rethink a controversial issue, or I was inspired to take action.

Run-of-the-Mill (Got the message across, but nothing spectacular). The presentation held my interest most of the time. I was able to follow the key topics, although I had to filter information that more cluttered than cleared my comprehension. After the presentation, I felt the presentation provided worthwhile insight, yet I was not motivated to pursue the topic further.

Waste-of-Time (Confusing, boring, and nothing in it for me). The speaker had a story to tell, but I just couldn't figure out the plot. I struggled to pay attention. The speaker beleaguered a topic that did not interest me. I found myself wondering, "When will this end?"

Winning presentations develop a connection between the speaker and audience members. The speaker's message and key points are clear, easy to understand, and engage the audience. The audience members are persuaded, motivated, and inspired to take action.

Now, let's go one step further. Think of a presentation you gave in the past. How would you rate yourself? And, more importantly, how would your listeners rate you?

This article focuses on developing your presentation's message and improving your ability to connect with and involve your listeners. As in a theatrical play, your presentation must contain an opening scene that engages your audience, a main story line, and a closing scene that leaves the audience thinking.

Act 1. The Opening Connect and Engage Your Listeners

Connecting with and engaging your audience is a form of communication. The communication isn't a one-way street, with you telling them what you want to say. Rather, it's a way of focusing on what benefits they'll gain so they want to hear more.

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of knowing your audience. If you can't answer the questions below, research them. Do this before you even begin developing your presentation. When you know your listeners' characteristics and their levels of knowledge about your subject, you can tailor your presentation in a way that speaks to them. Here are some key questions to help you to understand your audience:

How much do they know about your subject?
What are their ages?
What are their occupations and responsibilities?
What are their needs, wants, interests?
What might be their barriers?
What are their attitudes toward your subject matter?
What do they know about you?

When you step up to deliver your opening remarks, your audience members' attentions are scattered in a myriad of directions. It is your job to take the first 5-10 minutes to direct their focus on the subject matter, get them connected to you, and engage their interest. To do this successfully, use the following elements to develop your opening:

Focus your audience's attention on the subject matter. (3-5 minutes) Using a story, quote, short skit or demonstration, transport your audience members to a specific place and time. Be sure to tie this into your presentation so your audience knows the relevancy.

Develop a one-on-one connection between you and your audience members. (1-2 minutes) Share what you're passionate about on the subject matter. Be careful to keep it positive and focused on "safe" statements that can be easily digested by your audience. By sharing your feelings, your audience members feel a relational connection with you.

Tell them what to expect. (1 minute) In a couple of sentences, tell your audience what they'll be getting from your presentation. Be sure to tailor this to your listeners' wants and needs.

Tell them what you want them to do and how it will benefit them. (1 minute) In general terms, tell them what you will want them to do and what's in it for them if they do it.

Another important element that's not listed above and yet is critical to include throughout your presentation is to connect with your audience through eye contact. Take the time to see your audience members and let them feel appreciated through something as simple as *seeing them*. Don't rush the eye contacts -- spend at least one sentence worth with each person. Doing so creates a sense of two-way communication. If you have a small group, be sure to include each person. If the group is large, pick varying areas of the room to make contact.

Act 2. The Main Story

A Concise, Clear, and Motivating Message

The key to creating a presentation that is memorable and persuasive is (1) focus your presentation on what is relevant to your audience members, and (2) deliver a message that is concise, clear, and motivating.

“The wisest approach to structuring your talk is not to overload it with your own brilliance and wisdom, but to present specific, easy-to-follow steps that listeners can use to get results.” -- Lee Glickstein, Founder of Transformational Speaking

You may have loads of information to support your subject matter. Don't make the mistake of dumping too much information on your audience – you'll lose them. Here are the basic steps for creating the body of your message:

1. Have a clear understanding of your goal as it relates to your subject matter. This includes knowing the steps you want your listeners to take.
2. Develop three key points you want to get across to your audience. Keep it to three, no more. For example, the key points in my *Building Relationships Using 'Style'* workshops are: (1) The context of “communication,” (2) Identifying your own communication style, and (3) Skills development.
3. Develop three sub-points for each of your key points. You can have less than three sub-points, but never more. Remember, less is more in this situation. If you have trouble narrowing it down, think of your audience members and what would be most relevant to them. Which sub-point can they relate to the most?
4. Have a supply of stories, quotes, or poems that are related to your subject matter. Use them to help your audience understand or relate to your sub-points.
5. Audiovisuals, PowerPoint slides, flip charts, overhead projector, physical objects, etc. are good to use in a support role. Use them to help your audience understand your key and sub-points. If you want to use PowerPoint slides, be sure they support what you're saying. Don't use them to tell the audience everything they need to know.

Using this method for creating the body of your message creates an easy to follow outline for you. You won't need to memorize your speech. Just follow your three key points and corresponding sub-points. Here's how it works: After your opening, you go right into key point 1 and its supporting sub-points. Move to key point 2 and its supporting sub-points. After key point 3 and its sub-points, you'll wrap-up your presentation with your closing.

Act 3. The Closing **Ties Up Loose Ends and Leaves Them Thinking**

Five minutes is all you need. Your closing is similar to your opening:

Strengthen that one-on-one connection. Remind them of your passion about this subject. Now, after your presentation, they can relate to it.

Give them the specific steps to take. The purpose of your presentation is to get your listeners to do something. Tell them what you want them to do.

Remind them of how they benefit. Don't assume they have seen the benefits. Tell them. They'll be more likely to take action if they can see what's in it for them.

End with a quote, story, poem, or song. Leave them with something they'll think about, something that supports your message.

Presentation Day

As I stated earlier, your presentation can be done without memorizing what you want to say. In fact, it's better that you don't memorize it as a speech. Let your speaking flow with the key elements of your opening, the key and sub-points of your main message, and conclude with the key elements of your closing.

Here's an easy way to create a one-page cheat sheet that will prompt you through your presentation. On a single sheet of paper, write the headings "Opening," "Main Message," and "Closing." Under each heading, list a few words that represent the elements and key- and sub-points. For example, the "Opening" section on my cheat sheet for *Building Relationships With 'Style'* reads:

Opening

- Music – Wedding Coord. (*play music w/opening story*)
- Passion = Comm. (*connection*)
- Clarify Style/ Dev. Skills (*what to expect*)
- Impr. Relationships/ Reduce Stress, Conflict (*what I want them to do & how it will benefit them*)

During your presentation, set your cheat sheet to the side (don't grip it!). If you need to refer to it, simply walk over to it. It's perfectly fine to pause from your presentation and take a look at your notes.

Remember, your objective is to connect with your audience and get them motivated to act. Acknowledge and interact with your listeners through eye contact. Make sure your message is focused on what is relevant to them. And, be sure to include all three "acts" of your performance – the opening, the main story, and the closing.

In Conclusion

One of the major presuppositions in Neuro-Linguistic Programming is:

"The meaning of your communication is the response that you get."

The reason "why" you do presentations is to get a specific response from your audience. Think about it, in each of the following reasons for giving a presentation, you are looking for a specific response:

- Recommend a course of action
- Propose a solution to a problem
- Report on a program's status
- Teach new skills for improved performance
- Provide new information for current practices
- Sell a product or service

Let's go back to a couple of questions I asked you at the beginning of this article.

Think of a presentation you gave in the past. How would you rate yourself? And, more importantly, how would your listeners rate you?

Add one more question to that, "Did you get the *specific* response you wanted from your audience?"

Use the steps outlined in this article, and, in doing so, you'll have your audience's attention. They'll be interested and actively involved as you deliver your main message. They'll be clear as to what you want them to do, and they'll be inspired to take action – the action you want them to take.

© 2006 Quest PCC, Karen Newquist. All rights reserved.