

# Perfect presentations

Presentation skills are vital to your career success. Michelle Bowden offers some hints on how to improve your own presenting style.

**M**ost of us have experienced a business meeting that went wrong. Where the presenter either didn't grab your attention from the start, or where they lost control of the presentation at some stage. But the question is, have you ever been the presenter who delivered a less than successful business presentation or pitch? Have you ever facilitated a meeting that ended in your client walking out at the end, busting to get back to work, with no intention of engaging in a business partnership with you in any way, shape or form? At the time, it feels as though the meeting was a huge waste of time for you, for them and for your business.

Interestingly, most people think of presenting as something separate from life. As something we only do when there's a lectern, some slides and an audience. But just because you don't have to make big pitches to a board or represent your company at an industry conference, it doesn't mean you don't present to people. We present to people with the intention of influencing them every single day. We present to our clients, our staff, our suppliers and potential clients. You are presenting yourself every day at work whether you realise it or not, and presentation skills are critical when you are trying to get ahead in your business.

The more successful entrepreneurs I meet, the more I realise that regardless of their intelligence and business acumen, regardless of their excellent products or service, and regardless of their commitment to their business, these people have one thing in common. They know how to present their ideas in a compelling, influential and memorable way. They know how to structure their thoughts, and how to connect with people, and they say what they want to say in a way that resonates with their audience. They inspire and compel their audiences to take action.

## What is presenting?

Presenting is any form of communication with another person (including face-to-face, over the phone, by email or through the internet), from one-on-one, to small and large groups, and we present both formally and informally. In short, most people in business present regularly every day of their life.

Presenting is about connecting with people through the words you choose to say and the way you choose to say them. When you present, you show people who you are and how you can help them. It's an opportunity to step up and be noticed for what you can offer. Presenting provides a unique opportunity for you to showcase your professional expertise and accelerate your career.

You may have thought that you were just running another team meeting, but your team members that morning were hoping it would be a motivational event that would encourage them to work harder and not apply for that job with your competitor.

You may have thought that this was just another prospective client as you answered the phone to convert the business – but this potential client has already spoken to your three closest competitors as they shop around for the best solution to their problem.

You may have thought that you were just a small part of the picture, just the technical expert with the graphs and charts, but the client was watching the way you presented your information with a plan to refer you to their biggest supplier.

You may have thought you were just answering another email enquiry that came through your website contacts page, but the person enquiring actually had over one million dollars to spend on their next investment property purchase, and they were judging your interpersonal skills.

Presentation skills really matter. In case you're not yet convinced, did you know that in a business context, audience members or clients typically give you less than five minutes to prove yourself before completely switching off?

According to a recent survey in Australia, conducted with over 800 employees from small, medium and large businesses, if you are an effective business presenter, you are in the minority. When asked about workplace presenters they had seen in the last 12 months, only 38 per cent of respondents thought presenters understood their needs as a client. More than half the respondents said that presenters generally read from their PowerPoint slides. Only 40 per cent of respondents found presenters to be engaging, and only 28 per cent said that they were moved to action after seeing presenters.

### What does all this mean?

It means we are typically going to too many boring meetings and workplace presentations where the presenter is not enjoying themselves and the audience is enjoying themselves even less. It's critical that you remember that anyone can be an exceptional presenter; it's just a matter of knowing what to do and doing it.

Every important presentation should be planned, and the good news is that the more practised or accomplished you are at crafting your message, the more efficient and productive you will become.

There are only three phases to exceptional presenting:

**Analysis** – where you work out what you'd like to achieve. This is where you ascertain the current state of your audience as well as your own desired state.

**Design** – where you put your presentation together, making sure that you shift your audience from their current state to your desired state.

**Delivery** – where you communicate the message to your audience so that they are compelled to take action.

This three-phase approach is results-orientated. Ultimately, it will help inspire you to step up and really be heard by the people around you; structure your message so it's clear and compelling; deliver your message with excellence (no matter how dull you think your subject is!), so that your audience responds positively.

If you are not good at presenting in business, you need to learn how to do it right now. Improving your presentation skills will help you to command attention, gain respect and easily sell your ideas to anyone. And the great news is that it's not a

difficult skill to take charge of and improve immediately. It's time you started to win more appointments and close more deals. With improved presentation skills, you can showcase your professional expertise on a daily basis, accelerate your business, and generally get more of what you want in your life.

### Be exceptional

Anyone can be an exceptional presenter; it's just a matter of knowing what to do and doing it. Here are 10 tips to get you started.

**1** Analyse the audience before writing out what you'd like to say. What are they thinking, feeling and doing, and what change are you trying to create in them?

**2** Learn how to build rapport. Remember, it's not about you, it's all about the audience. Make a plan for how you will flex your personality and approach so you are as like your audience as possible – that's what rapport is all about.

**3** Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse to increase your confidence and improve your performance. A typical executive that I might coach in my business would rehearse their opening and closing between 50 and 200 times. Yes, you read those numbers correctly. Great presenters are made not born.

**4** Warm up before you try to speak, so you don't trip over your words. In particular, warm up your lips, cheeks and jaw. A rich, resonant vocal quality does wonders for your credibility and makes it easier for people to listen to you.

**5** Focus on your audience at all times. It's not about you – it's always all about them.

**6** Don't read out your slides to your audience. PowerPoint is a visual aid – it's not the presentation.

**7** Use your body to support your message. For example, don't place your hands over your crotch in what is known as the fig leaf or reluctant nudist posture. Do try to stand with your hands by your side, and use them as a visual aid when necessary to reinforce your key messages.

**8** Connect with your audience – really see them. Look into the whites of the audience's eyes and truly engage them. This way, you'll be more compelling, you'll reduce your own nerves and guess what – the secret to an interesting voice is direct, connected eye contact.

**9** Pause and breathe. This helps your audience to catch up with your ideas, and it gives you clarity of thought and a feeling of greater relaxation, plus it also helps you project your voice more powerfully.

**10** Ask for what you want, so the audience knows what you want them to do as a result of listening to you, and be sure that you leave them feeling terrific at the end.

Remember – it doesn't matter how good your company is, how good your products or service are, how good your ideas are or how good your message is if no one's listening. Improve your presentations skills today and reap the extraordinary benefits. **em**

.....  
**Michelle Bowden** is a master of presentation and influence, and the author of *How to Present*, the ultimate guide to presenting your ideas and influencing people using techniques that actually work. For more information, visit [www.michellebowden.com.au](http://www.michellebowden.com.au).  
 .....