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Presenting yourself in the best light

By **Jack Downton**

In business, the way you deal with people, the impression you leave, and the way others see you go as far towards your professional success as your technical skills and academic knowledge.

Therefore, it is vital, whether you are a lawyer or an accountant, an architect or a marketer, that the dealings you have leave as good an impression as possible.

The most important way to engage people, and to influence people, whether a crowd whilst giving a presentation, to a small panel in a business pitch, or one-on-one at corporate networking events, is to earn the other person's trust – body language, eye contact, pauses, preparation, and being yourself all contribute to achieving this. Belief in someone is imperative whether you are getting people on your side whilst giving a speech, in a business meeting, or with soldiers in the battlefield.

Studies from Harvard, Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Foundation all indicate that success in your job depends around 85% on your people skills: 'people buy people.'

To influence people, we need to be interested, not interesting. Those who want to be interesting usually fail: they talk about themselves far too much, whilst those that actively listen and appear interested in the other person are far more likely to have an influencing impact.

Business Pitches

Take business pitches as examples. Whatever sector you're in, whether it is management consultancy or banking, it is for the most part, a service, not a mere product. Clients therefore buy into 'you', not just what you offer. That being so, you have to sell yourself as well as what you offer.

Do this by exploring potential clients' issues. Questions are much powerful than your ability to reel off where your offices are, or how many partners there are at your firm. Questions are powerful, and by asking them, the client feels listened to, rather than sold to. When you find out what is important to the client, they learn, you learn, and they take away with them the feeling that you were genuinely interested in them. Pitches are not just opportunities to close deals, but to establish relationships. The aim therefore is to leave the client with a good impression about not just what you do, but you as a person and feeling positive about doing business with you in the future.

Networking

A clever person knows lots of things. But a successful person knows lots of people. Networking events are fantastic opportunities to meet great business contacts and given the scale of the economic downturn, it is particularly important to put yourself in touch with people that may prove handy – not just now, but in the months and years ahead.

Not everyone can be a Stephen Fry who delights an audience with witty stories and engrossing anecdotes. Yet that doesn't mean that you can't be a successful networker. Many successful networkers often allow the other people in the group to have the greater speaking part. That means that you won't run the risk of appearing boring but the other person will remember feeling important, having spent an enjoyable time in your company and leave with a good impression of you.

The key to having influence is making sure that your contact develops into a quality working relationship. Having parted and made a good impression, it is really important to follow up and maintain the momentum. It is best to do so within forty-eight hours. Consider how to retain and develop the personal touch. One method I often use is writing a handwritten note attached to an article or newsletter that may be of interest to them.

Presentations

With most presentations, the purpose of the meeting is to influence your audience, win work, secure investment or enthuse colleagues. But many people see it as an exercise in bombarding their audience with lots of information. Most of this is superfluous, weakens your impact, and most of it will be forgotten.

In your preparation, be clear what your point is that you want to put across. Consider what you want your audience to walk away with. If your presentation contains too many messages, the chances are the audience will leave remembering very little. Keep it succinct and focused – because when overwhelmed with information, nobody retains anything.

Remember you are in control of your presentations. A great presentation is made not just by the moments when you are speaking but also when you're not. Remember the power of pauses. The only person in the room who doesn't like silence during a presentation is the presenter. Pause to add emphasis, hold eye contact to show you mean what you say and allow people to think about what you have said. Pausing allows your listeners to process and digest what you say. They are how the audience gets involved. Pausing after you deliver a point gives impact to your message and improves the opportunities for eye contact, making your presentations much more absorbing. You almost cannot pause for too long. No matter how long you pause for, the length will feel comfortable for your listeners, even if it feels like an eternity for you.

You should shine, not the whiteboard

Whether in a business pitch, or a presentation all too often the same mistakes are made. Before resorting automatically to PowerPoint, ask yourself whether it is to help you or your audience and consider how much it takes the focus off you. Your aim ought to be to portray yourself in the best possible light and therefore it is advisable that you think very carefully before using aids as

they take the focus off you. Nobody has come for a slide show, so let your audience or potential clients remember you – not your series of slides.

As human beings, we communicate best when we are relaxed. But as soon as we come under pressure, much of what makes us naturally good seems to disappear. We often cease to engage; we talk at people; we talk too much and we fail to listen. Ultimately, introductions, business pitches, and presentations should be made as simple as possible, so that your dealings with people today will be remembered.

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