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Presenting to colleagues, clients and investors

By **Jack Downton**

Who do you think is a particularly influential speaker – Tony Blair or Bill Clinton, perhaps Barack Obama, Warren Buffett or maybe Richard Branson?

Charismatic, clear, succinct and influential speakers – yet people who are not renowned for their use of PowerPoint! So why do accountants use it as though they are being paid by the slide?

I have coached hundreds of partners and directors, and many high-flying managers and associates at accountancy and other professional firms. Three common factors are at the heart of weak presentations: too much PowerPoint, a lack of thought about their audience and a failure to pause in the right places.

For most people, addressing each of these points will dramatically improve their performance while improving their confidence, and will also help to overcome the terror that afflicts many people at the thought of speaking to a large group.

There are a number of areas that are particularly relevant to accountants and Financial Directors. They often try to cram in far too much detail ending up with a data dump, thinking that Power Point makes it understandable for the audience on the basis that “the more I tell them the more they will go away with”. In fact the very reverse is true – Less is more! This can be partly due to the assumption that “I need to tell them a lot to prove I know my job” and partly on an assumption that, because I am interested in the detail, so too will the audience. Mostly, the audience doesn’t want to know what the accountant/Financial Director knows. They want to know what the *implications are for them*. In short, the accountant/Financial Director is not asking the critical “So what?” question about their content.

When a senior financial speaker stands up to speak, I automatically assume, until proved otherwise, they are competent to speak – namely that they know their business. They don’t have to prove it to me over the first few minutes. Any ‘proving’ session is counterproductive as it takes that much longer to get to the point.

The best speakers on financial matters I have heard are those who have taken a complex set of figures or data and simplified them to the extent that the implications were clearly understandable to me.

So, two other factors at the heart of poor presentations are the inclusion of far too much material and the failure to simplify. Strategic, key issues are the province of the spoken presentation; back up detail the province of follow up notes. Together, speech and notes, form the complete presentation.

PowerPoint – how it dramatically reduces your impact

With slides you need to remember that the audience will not be concentrating on you. And if they aren't concentrating on you, they certainly won't remember your key points or be influenced by what you are saying. Who makes the impact? You as a highly competent professional or you as a highly paid slide shop operator?

- Use slides sparingly, especially those containing only words. However, a picture is worth a thousand words;
- Ask yourself “are the slides for my benefit or the audience?” If the slides are really your notes, don't use them;
- Handing out notes before you speak makes it difficult to hold your audience's attention. Give them out afterwards if at all possible (ninety-five percent of the time they are never read anyway, unless they contain really important financial information!);
- Often you will have to present charts or large amounts of figures. Introduce the slide before you show it, have key data highlighted and give the audience a chance to read the data before talking over the slide (they can't read the chart and listen carefully to you simultaneously).

What does your audience need to hear?

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

The problem a lot of people have stems right from the start of their preparation – they are not clear with themselves at the outset what *the point* is they want to put across.

One senior accountant from a large firm forced himself to give seminars because he realised they were potentially an excellent way of gaining clients. However, he was continually conscious of his nerves and as a result, was noted as speaking much too fast. Not only was he highly uncomfortable but so too were his audience and the critical thing was that they did not leave the seminars with the confidence in him that he wished to instil. When we worked together, it became clear that he was convinced that he should memorise his talks and give them without notes. He was concerned that to use notes would appear unprofessional. We looked at a very powerful form of speaker's notes that he could follow unobtrusively, giving him the confidence to relax and cover his subject matter without worrying that he was going to forget what he wanted to say. After his next and happily, very successful seminar, I asked him for one thing that had made a key difference. Without hesitation, he said “Notes – and permission to use them”!

It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it

There is a lot of nonsense talked about body language, arm movements etc. when presenting. Unless you are doing something incredibly odd or irritating (like jingling your keys in your pocket) if you are doing a half-decent presentation your audience won't notice as you as you will be holding their attention.

However, a big mistake many people do is speak slowly in order to make themselves more easily understood. In fact all speaking slowly does is turn your voice into a ponderous monotone.

The right pace to speak is at your usual pace with your head held up as normal (not buried into your chest reading your notes, as this kills your voice projection). However, what is really important is where you pause.

There is only one person in the room who doesn't like silence during a presentation and that is the presenter. Pause to add emphasis, hold eye contact with the audience to show you mean what you say and allow people to think about what you have said. This is particularly important when addressing foreign audiences as even the best linguists need extra time to assimilate speech not in their native language.

You almost cannot pause for too long! No matter how long you pause for, the length will feel okay for your audience but for the presenter it lasts an eternity. You can test this by recording a presentation (preferably a rehearsal with a few willing colleagues as the audience and when you play back compare how long you think you paused for, with how long you actually did).

Your purpose as a speaker is typically to; get the audience to pay attention to you, remember your key point and trust your judgement. They can't do this if they are distracted by reading slides, sent to sleep by a slow monotone or wondering when you are going to get to the point (or receiving too much information too quickly). Following the above tips will help most speakers make a dramatic improvement – as long as this is combined with healthy amounts of preparation and rehearsal too.

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