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Presentation is everything

By **Jack Downton**

To Kill a Mockingbird, Kavanagh QC, Judge John Deed. They all paint a picture of the charismatic lawyer. One with confidence, conviction, eloquence and poise. A natural raconteur, able to deliver powerful, persuasive addresses to an audience hanging on every word.

Of course, in the real world, it can be a very different story. The majority of lawyers that I have trained inform me that presenting in front of people, whether a group of ten, or an audience of hundreds, is not something that they feel comfortable with. There are many reasons why an otherwise brilliant lawyer can fail to deliver engaging presentations: talking too quickly, talking too slowly, talking at your audience rather than to them, more PowerPoint than presenting, focusing too much on technical detail. All that preparation, all that hard work and sadly half of your audience is asleep.

The good news is that, with a few tips, any lawyer can improve his presenting technique.

Preparation, preparation, preparation

Lawyers are trained in appreciating the details: clauses in contracts, phrasing in statutes, the words of witnesses. But don't assume that because you're interested in the small details, so too will the audience. It's often assumed that the more you tell your audience, the more they will remember. This isn't the case. Lawyers often bombard their audience with masses of complex information, facts and figures, tables and graphs, so as to prove their knowledge as experts. All this achieves is to leave your audience feeling overwhelmed, switching off and learning very little. The focus for your presentation ought to be imparting the information that your audience actually needs and wants to hear. The audience doesn't want, doesn't need, to know what the lawyer knows. What they want to know is what all this will mean for them.

Is there a point to this?

What I always suggest however is to use PowerPoint sparingly. Keep PowerPoint for the bare essentials – figures, raw data, vast tables etc. What you need to be aware of is that when you use visual aids, the focus of attention is on PowerPoint, and not, therefore, on you. This means that your audience's attention can drift. And if they are not concentrating on you, they won't remember any of your key points, come away with a sense of being influenced by what you had to say or bought into you as a person.

Lawyers get nervous like everyone else and one of their biggest fears is forgetting their words. Some people assume however that relying on notes makes the speaker look unprofessional and ill-prepared. Yet notes can ease nerves and allow you to present your speech in a natural and relaxed manner without the worry of forgetting what you want to say.

Use them to remember the ideas you want to convey. Never try to memorise the words. It is bad use of your time and the results are generally very disappointing.

Pause for thought

What is really important is where and for how long you pause. The lawyer giving the speech normally fears silence. A silent room, full of faces staring back is a terrifying prospect. And so the speaker delivers a fast flowing stream of noise. But the speaker must learn that it is not only acceptable but utterly essential to pause.

Pause adds emphasis. This coupled with plenty of eye contact with the audience shows conviction in what you say and allows people to think about what you have said. If they think about it, they'll remember it.

You should aim to talk at your normal speed, but even that will be too fast for your audience. What feels excruciatingly long to you will pass as natural for your audience. So use pauses frequently and have the confidence to make them longer than you might initially be comfortable with.

If you're the kind of person who gets nervous speaking to large groups of people, consider recording yourself rehearsing the presentation at home. By recording yourself, you'll see where you're likely to run into difficulties. Also, don't make the mistake of burying your head in your notes as all this does is stifle the projection of your voice. If you sound natural when you speak, your presentation will become much more engaging.

Just as a case requires lots of preparation, presentations are no less different. By working on different techniques, lawyers can improve their presenting skills and be confident that they can give absorbing and interesting presentations and a delivery which would make even Kavanagh QC proud.

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