



MAKING EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS

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A big part of my role as the Pennsylvania Bar Association's Law Practice Management Coordinator involves creating and giving seminars. I am often complimented on my style of presentation, and on the content as well. Creating and making effective presentations is more art than science. But it's an art which can definitely be learned. In today's competitive marketplace, attorneys are frequently called upon to make presentations. Whether it's a "beauty pageant" for a potential client, an education-based marketing event, a bar association task force meeting, or a courtroom presentation, certain basic skills come into play. Since you may find yourself called upon to make a presentation, I thought I'd share with you some of my success tips.

Speak with enthusiasm. One of the most frequent comments made about my presentations is that I put so much energy and enthusiasm into them, that the listener is never bored. If you drone on and on in a monotone, your listeners will be as bored as you seem to be. If you are excited about the information you present, those listening will be energized and focused on what you present. To keep your conversation animated, imagine you're sitting around the dining room table with good friends, and you're excitedly telling them about the information.

Make eye contact. As much as you may experience discomfort speaking in front of others and want to hide with your head bent down and eyes focused on your notes, laptop, or slides, you will lose your audience if you do not make frequent eye contact. And by doing so you will be able to see if they are "with" you or not. When people appear lost, you can elaborate further. When people are nodding their heads in agreement, you will actually be energized by their acknowledgement. So find a few friendly faces in the crowd at various locations in the room, and at a minimum look at each of them frequently.

Move around and don't block the screen. You know the old saying "You may be a pain, but I can't see through you." Don't anchor yourself in one spot. Give everyone a chance to clearly see the screen unobstructed, no matter where they are sitting. Even if there's no screen to your presentation, by moving around you will keep the audience attention focused on you. As a side note, on the rare occasion I notice someone dozing in the audience, I slowly walk down the aisle to their location as I continue my presentation. They will normally awaken when they realize the speaker is in close proximity, although on rare occasion I have had to put my hand gently on their shoulder, which is done subtly so as to appear to the audience as a movement of emphasis regarding what I'm saying.

Use limited fonts and large type. People should not be straining to read your slides. Keep the font changes to no more than 2 or 3 on a slide, and keep the type large and

easy to read. Use sans serif fonts like Arial or Helvetica. There should not be too much to read either. Use just bulleted points. The audience should be focused on you to receive the bulk of the information. Remember that good design builds clarity, not complexity.

Use color wisely. Colors mean things to people. Red is danger. Yellow is caution. Green is go or good. And so forth. Don't use too many colors, and don't use them indiscriminately. Avoid low-contrast colors which make the audience strain to read.

Use clip art sparingly or in lieu of text. Clip art should be used when it adds to, strongly reinforces, or clarifies the information on the slide. Don't feel you have to fill every space on the slide. "White space" is the unfilled area, and it is just as important as the text and images on the slide. So be sure to leave sufficient white space on each slide. That being said, pictures and photographs can make a point quicker and more clearly than text, and will be more memorable.

Make your objectives clear. I like to do my presentations "military style". That means I start out by telling people what I'll be telling them. Then I tell them. Then I tell them what I told them. This is otherwise known as introduction/overview, body of presentation, and summary/conclusion. Progress through your presentation in clear, linear steps toward the ultimate conclusion, continuously building on concepts previously presented.

Speak to your audience at their level. It's irrelevant what your knowledge level is. You must speak to the knowledge level of your audience or jury. Explain concepts clearly, starting with basics. Include the information they will need and want. Build in audience interaction by asking questions at key points in your presentation at seminars.

Test the equipment often, rehearse infrequently. Most people make the mistake of over-rehearsing for a presentation. As a result, instead of coming across in a natural, conversational tone, they follow a script so closely they become monotone and boring. Check your presentation for organization and thoroughness, but don't "rehearse" it more than you need to in order to ensure it's the right length of time. On the other hand, your equipment should be tested frequently, so that when you make your actual presentation, you can be confident everything will be working as needed.

Provide good handouts at seminars and meetings. A frequent misjudgment of presenters is to provide inadequate handouts. "I want them to listen to me. If I give them all the information in the handout, they don't need to hear what I have to say." I hear this frequently from less-than-stellar speakers. Actually, I find the opposite is true. With poor handouts, people are concentrating on taking notes, and worrying about what they're missing and getting you to repeat it. As a consequence, they are actually paying LESS attention to the speaker, and hearing less. With great handouts they don't have to worry about taking notes, so they can sit back and pay attention to what you have to say. And as a consequence, they will enjoy the presentation more, assuming the presenter does a good job.



Special considerations apply to courtroom presentations. Rule 901 of Evidence requires fair and accurate representation of facts. Most judges will require that your presentation slides be presented to opposing counsel a week before to avoid challenge

and possible disruption of the trial or hearing. In order to maximize your effectiveness, if using a list of bullets, only reveal one at a time, or the jury will read the whole list rather than listen to your explanations. Do not present the next slide until you are ready to cover it, or people will naturally read it and miss the testimony. If your witness is strong, don't distract with any slide or display the next slide until the witness is done. And if your witness is weak, use a slide to divert attention from the speaker, and reinforce the fact you are trying to convey

Start and finish on time. At seminars and meetings, there will always be people who arrive late. It's rude to hold up everyone else waiting for the stragglers. Get started at the time advertised. You should also finish at the predetermined time. I always ask someone in the audience to give me a signal when I have gotten to the half way mark, and again when I have 10 minutes left. I may do the same presentation a dozen times, but it isn't the exact same two times. That's because the audience interaction is an unknown factor. Depending on what I read on audience faces, and on what questions arise, I may spend more or less time in certain areas, and may include or exclude additional war stories. So you need to keep an eye on the clock so you can finish as scheduled. Those in attendance get really cranky when you go beyond the end time, and it can seriously detract from what was an otherwise effective presentation.

With some practice and observance of these simple tips, anyone can learn to be an effective presenter, regardless of the venue.

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