

## 10 Top Tips for Getting Your Message Across

In an increasingly competitive and fast-moving world, the ability to get your message over effectively and convincingly is essential in order to win, secure, and sustain business relationships, new business, or brief or train work teams. The tips within this resource are specifically related to presentations, but the principles also apply to team briefings, training sessions and meetings.

### 1. Focus on the message not the medium

We've all attended training sessions, briefings or presentations that are death by Powerpoint, with people showing innumerable, text heavy slides which they then proceed to read through. You then get a handout of the slides to take away with you which 6 months later mean nothing to you. This type of presentation results in most people switching off and remembering nothing. On average after 5 minutes of this type of presentation you will only have 10% attention from your audience thereby wasting yours and their time. So you need develop your presentation to keep over 80% of their attention all of the time.

The first thing to do is think about when you are in an audience what do you like and then what you dislike. The chances are most people will have the same feelings about the same aspects so include the former and omit the latter from your presentations.

You need to keep it simple and interesting to keep people's attention and also maximize their understanding. People acquire 75% of their knowledge through sight, 13% through hearing and 12% through touch, smell and taste, so any presentation needs to be visually stimulating in some way but also contain the other elements if possible for maximum understanding.

The key is to work out exactly what message you are trying to get across, what is the important information that people need to get from your presentation or talk. Only then can you start to look at the ways you can get that information across.

It might well be a good Powerpoint presentation that is needed but it could equally include a site visit, videos, models, Q and A sessions etc., or best of all a combination of several methods together. A briefing on how to mend a particular machine could start with a short video or demonstration and then move on to participants practicing on models. New safety procedures could be done by doing a practice drill.

So you should choose the method that is the best fit for the message, rather than trying to fit the message into a Powerpoint presentation.

## 2. Understand the barriers to listening

Did you know we only actually listen to about 25% of what we hear and tune out the rest, and that is on a good day? Also people can think 4 times faster than they can talk so the temptation is to use this 'spare time' to daydream. In addition to our natural ability to switch off after so long, there are a number of other barriers to listening and if you don't address them your audience will only take away a fraction of the information you want them to.

Here are some of the main barriers to listening that people can experience;

**Psychological barriers** — these can include difference in status between you and them, their mood etc. which stop them taking you seriously or warming to your personality

**Environmental barriers** — such as noise, interruptions, poor lighting etc. which distract people or make it hard to hear or see all the information

**Linguistic barriers** — such as a monotonous voice, complex words or acronyms being used excessively so people switch off and start to think of other things

**Physiological barriers** — these can include aches and pains, tiredness, disability, illness or hangover making people unable to concentrate

**Perceptual barriers** — these relate to differences of appearance or culture and using stereotypes and labelling people before you hear them out

**Content barriers** — this can be linked to the linguistic barriers but can also include the content being boring or repetitive and can lead to cherry picking key pieces and switching off for the rest.

**Emotional barriers** — you don't know what is going on in people's lives and they can be preoccupied with their own worries so can't focus on what you are saying

**Physical / Geographical** — this can be screens in the wrong place or columns in the way, different buildings that are difficult to get to etc., rooms being too hot or cold etc. which make people feel it is a chore or uncomfortable to be there

You need to remove or reduce these barriers as much as possible to enable people to actively listen to you so they fully understand and can respond to what you are saying.

### 3. Learn to listen

We have 2 ears and 1 mouth for a reason but all too often we overuse the latter and underuse the former. Nobody likes awkward silences and the temptation is to fill them with words, but sometimes the silences say more than the words so choose them carefully.

But we don't just listen with our ears, we also listen with our eyes and combining the two is called Active listening. This is the ability to understand and respond to what is being said using verbal and non-verbal methods rather just using verbal acknowledgement that we have heard what is being said.

Active listening is about being attentive and using eye contact and a more upright posture when someone is talking to you. It is also about noticing physical nods as well as verbal nods such as I see, Ok, understood etc. It's about using prompts such as 'tell me more about' and paraphrasing such as 'summarise in your own words' to check that people are listening.

When you are delivering a message, you need to multi task and listen to your audience. Listen carefully to their questions as this can identify if they have understood a point or not or if they just want more information or if there maybe a fundamental problem that needs addressing immediately. Sometimes what they don't say is more telling than what they do so you need to listen for omissions and use questioning techniques to delve deeper. Also listen for tone of voice to see if it is aggressive or submissive as this could require you to change your delivery to reduce these negative emotions.

Listen to see if people are talking amongst themselves or tapping on their phones etc. This means they have lost engagement with what you are saying and you need to get them back otherwise they will miss key points of the message.

There are many benefits to listening more such as helping to improve working relationships or gather facts and information to use later. It also helps you gain a greater understanding of the people you are presenting to and you are seen as thoughtful and reliable.

## 4. POLISHED Presentations

First impressions count. Before you even start trying to get your message across you need to engage your audience and you need to do this in the first minute of contact or you risk losing them before you even begin.

Start by making sure you are dressed appropriately. Don't dress in a suit if everyone else is going to be casual or in overalls etc., or vice versa, it can put them off immediately (remember the psychological barrier?).

Make sure you are in the mood to do the presentation, an audience will soon pick up if you are not interested in the message you are trying to get across and will think if you aren't bothered, why should they be.

Always greet the audience and give a simple introduction of yourself and what you are there for. Be friendly, polite and helpful and use people's names wherever possible.

Once you have these things sorted you can move on to what and how in relation to getting your message across. Here are the basic rules for presentations but we will look deeper into various aspects in later sections.

**P**ronunciation – always speak clearly at a volume and speed that suits the room and the audience

**O**bjective – know the message you are trying to get across, what do you want people to know at the end and stick to that goal

**L**ength – people's attention spans are reducing and people listen best if things are done in bitesize pieces

**I**mpact – you want your audience to go away feeling they have gained more information that is more useful than they were expecting

**S**nappy – think of bitesize chunks but also the fact that the information you give needs to be in easily recountable bullet points and examples etc.

**H**umour – it is good to add in a little humour, just not too much, and always be careful to ensure any humour won't offend anyone in the audience

**E**quipment – ensure it is what you need, that it works and there is technical support available

**D**eliver – smile and keep eye contact with the audience, walk around the room to engage everyone and watch your posture so it exhibits confidence.

## 5. Know the 10 P's

There is a rule in relation to public speaking which helps people remember what you are saying called the Rule of 3 such as I came, I saw, I conquered, Location, Location, Location. This rule of 3 is all about the content of a talk but even before you get to that point there is another rule, the 10 P's of presenting, all about planning a preparation.

**P**rior **P**roper **P**lanning and **P**reparation, **P**revents **P**oor **P**erformance of the **P**erson  
**P**utting on the **P**resentation!

We all know about preparing to go on holiday. You need to find out if the country has what you want in terms of climate and activities, the hotel meets your specific needs, what time the flights are, when do you need to get to the airport, what travel documents and money you need etc. If you don't do this planning beforehand the consequences could be disastrous. You could miss your flight, they may not let you in to the country, it may be too hot or too cold for you, the hotel could be in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do, all of which could ruin your hard earned holiday.

The same principles apply to delivering a presentation or briefing. As discussed earlier, there are a number of barriers to listening and these need to be reduced to increase the effectiveness of your message. This is where planning and preparation is vitally important so you can engage your audience, and keep them engaged, so you get your whole message across.

The first things you need to know and plan for are the time and venue of the presentation or briefing. There is nothing worse than arriving late or at the wrong place, your audience will lose respect for you before you open your mouth. You also need to prepare any Powerpoint, enough handouts, equipment etc. to ensure everyone gets what they need and it all works properly.

The key things are Know your room, Know your audience, Know your material (there's that Rule of 3 again). The next few sections look in detail at different aspects of the planning required for a successful presentation.

## 6. Know your audience

One of the main mistakes people make when doing presentations or talking to a group of people, is not knowing who they are talking to. If you don't know that fundamental thing then you can run the risk of trying to teach your grandmother to suck eggs or giving a University level technical talk to school level people resulting in them switching off from the start. You need to find out about **them**.

Here are a few things you can do prior to delivering a presentation or briefing which will help you target what you are saying and be as relevant as possible to your audience.

**A**nalysis – who are the people (names) in the audience, where are they from (1 team or multiple teams)

**U**nderstanding – what level of understanding of the topic do they have, are they all novices or experts, do they know some but not much, is it a mix.

**D**emographics – age and social or cultural background can influence how people perceive you and engage with presentations.

**I**nterest – are they there because they want to be or because they have to be, the latter often negatively impacts engagement.

**E**nvironment – are they from an office, technical, scientific, hands-on environment, are they all from the same environment.

**N**eeds – are there any specific needs such as sign language, large print, disabled access etc. that will help them engage fully

**C**ustomised – are there any specific case studies or data that they would easily relate to

**E**xpectations – what do you think they are expecting from the presentation, is it the same as yours.

You only really get to know your audience when they are in front of you and you must be flexible and be prepared to change your delivery as your audience knowledge increases. So what can you do during your talk or presentation to help you get to know your audience better?

Listen to their questions and discussions and see if you can pick up themes that you can use to illustrate your message better. Share weaknesses (but not too personal) and mirror their posture and language to develop trust so they open up and relate to you more.

## 7. The presenters paradise – OASIS

So far we have looked at overarching principles for getting your message across, now we need to look at things in a little more detail. Here at Pet&r we have developed a simple way to help you develop and present your message which we call the Presenters Paradise.

Let's recap what you need to do to develop how you are going to get your message across, how to develop your presentation. Let's visit the **Oasis**.

**Objective** – why are you wanting to speak in the first place? Here you need to identify what your message is. Identify what you want them to know, what you want them to do and what you want them to feel.

**Audience** – this goes back to the previous top tip. How much do they already know, what are their buttons and are there any potential barriers to listening to your message. You also need to try and pre-empt their questions so you have answers prepared.

**Scope** – focusing on the scope of your presentation will help you avoid going into too much detail, blinding them with facts and figures and the risk of losing their engagement. Identify what they must know, what they should know and what you want them to know. Ditch anything that doesn't fit into one of these 3 areas.

**Information** – this is all about identifying what information you want to pass on and what the most appropriate way of doing that is. How complex is the information, how novel is it and how much should you give. Don't give more than you need to to get the message across.

**Structure** – this is about outlining what your presentation is going to look like. You need to have a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning is the introduction where you introduce yourself and what the presentation is basically about which includes the objectives. The content is self-explanatory and is dealt with further in the next top tip. The end is about recapping what you have said, summing up the key points and seeking confirmation that they have received the message correctly.

***“Tell'em what you'll tell 'em.”***

***“Tell 'em”***

***“Tell 'em what you told 'em”***

## 8. The presenters paradise – ISLAND

Once you have been to the Oasis, you now need to move on and develop the presentation or briefing itself. Welcome to the **Island**.

**I**nformation – you need to double check what information you are going to give. You ensure you are dealing with quality information, information that is up to date and relevant to the audience and the message. The quality depends on the complexity of the message but try and keep it to the essentials. If information does not add value to the message, don't include it.

**S**tructure – here you need to decide how you are going to deliver the message. Is it going to be all talk like a lecture, are you going to talk and then let them discuss or practice, are you going to talk and then let them make decisions on the way forward. It is far better to not do lectures but have audience participation interspersed with dialogue. This will keep them engaged more.

**L**ength – again this depends a lot on the nature and complexity of the message but also the time constraints of the participants etc. The key is **KISS** – **K**ep **I**t **S**hort and **S**imple. Identify the areas that need the most attention and give them the most time.

**A**ids – this is about using the right equipment to get your message across easily. This could be in the form of a Powerpoint presentations, simple charts and graphs, flipchart discussions, videos, practical demonstrations etc. Choose the right aids to get the biggest impact but remember, you need to be familiar with all the aids and be able to cope with the logistics of getting them there and using them.

**N**otes – never put all the information on Powerpoint slides!!! Make sure you have researched your topic well but only put key bullet points on slides and place the rest of the information in your notes. The slides need to act as memory joggers for the participants as well as you but your notes form the main substance of the talk.

**D**etail – this goes back to Information. Make sure the information you are giving is accurate, up to date and in sufficient detail to get the message across without over burdening the receivers with irrelevant detail.

## 9. The presenters paradise – BEACH

Once you have got your message, presentation or briefing sorted, you then need to think about delivering it. Let's go to the **Beach**.

**B**reakdown – before delivering any presentation or briefing always double check everything. Make sure you have employed KISS and remove things not required. Identify chunks of information that fit together with a natural break between the next chunk so you can take time to check understanding. Create a simple timeline of where you want to be after 10, 15, 30 minutes etc. based on your weighting from before and keep a clock or watch in sight so you can keep on track.

**E**xpression – this is all about the way you present, how you come across to maximise getting that message across. Consider the pitch of your voice and its tone. Keep at a medium pitch but don't let your tone be monotonous, vary it up and down as appropriate to avoid putting people to sleep. Make sure you don't go too fast or too slow, both will switch people off. And finally speak at a volume suitable for the setting.

**A**ttitude – lots of human communication is non-verbal and it can have a negative impact just like words. Try and demonstrate confidence and enthusiasm in what you are saying. Look people in the eye, walk round the room whilst speaking and smile. However a word of warning, this confidence and enthusiasm needs to be genuine, people can spot a fraud a mile off. Try and suppress butterflies but if nerves do show through apologise, own up and move on, people will respect you for it.

**C**heck – this is about ensuring you have actually got your message across. Recap and question people's understanding of what you have said and how it affects them. Check they are happy with what you have told them and let them express it if they are not. Finally check what they thought of your performance, it will help you for next time.

**H**andover – this is where you say goodbye. Explain any next steps, follow up sessions etc. and give out any memory aids such as handouts and copies of any slides. Offer any additional support if people need it.

## 10. Stay on path and be enthusiastic

So, you've done all your preparation and you're in full presentation swing, now is not the time to sit back and let it all flow automatically. In order to ensure you keep your audience to the very end you need to keep remembering the key points of engagement and don't get distracted.

You are bound to get people asking questions or unexpected things happening during the talk. The key here is to avoid going off piste too much. By all means answer specific questions or scenarios raised, but don't spend too long on them. If necessary say you will meet people after the talk to go through specifics individually. Sometimes going off piste can help embed knowledge, especially if real life examples are included, but to ensure you get through all the information you need to get across within the time, this should be kept to a minimum.

Sometimes, no matter what you do, some people will be negative going into the talk and throughout. So what should you do if the audience is hostile?

- Listen carefully and repeat questions out loud
- Answer directly and look at the person asking the question
- Anticipate areas of questioning
- Be friendly, always keep your temper
- Always tell the truth
- Treat two questions from the same person as two separate questions
- Watch your body language
- Keep things moving
- Conclude smartly
- Keep your enthusiasm shining through

So, to sum up our top tips for getting your message across, here is another group of 10 points, the 10 commandments of public speaking:

- ❖ **Speak.....in public - don't give a speech**
- ❖ **Three's are powerful - don't say too much**
- ❖ **Think about their ears - not your mouth**
- ❖ **Get their attention - Ooh! Wow! Ah! Ah!**
- ❖ **Be positive - stay on the path and learn how to relax**
- ❖ **Wishes rarely come true, fears always do**
- ❖ **Take a deep breath, pause a bit, and smile a lot**
- ❖ **If you want them to listen, look at them - all**
- ❖ **No-one ever got criticised for a short and simple speech**
- ❖ **Analyse and persuade rather than attack and insist**

At Pet&r we have many years of experience of presenting a large variety of topics to a variety of audiences, as well as helping others develop their own presentations skills. We have developed both 1 and 2 day training workshops on Presentation Skills where, working with a small group, we act as the "critical friend in the audience". We provide the basic skills for presenting well and offer objective and specific feedback that will enable individuals to recognise and build on their strengths, address or compensate for weaknesses, and fine tune their presentation style to meet the needs of their typical audience. For more information contact [lynne@petandr.co.uk](mailto:lynne@petandr.co.uk).