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What Makes a Great Presentation?

Many people ask themselves the question in this chapter's title. Is it in the way you create the content? Is it in the way you put the pieces together? Is it in the way you deliver the presentation?

I know that you'd agree that there have been times when you went to a presentation or a company meeting, only to walk away feeling that it was a total waste of time. It was not a great presentation. But why?

Actually, a great presentation is a combination of the three elements: content, design, and delivery. Stay focused and use what's presented in this book and you will severely lessen the chance that your participants will walk away after one of your presentations with the feeling that it was a total waste of time. This book was specifically written to help you create a great presentation.

Content, Design, and Delivery

There are three elements to a great presentation: content, design, and delivery. *Content* includes the research and organization of

> **Key Term**
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> **Presentation** A visual and aural event intended to communicate, for the purposes of providing information, helping to understand, gaining agreement, and/or motivating to act. That's a rough, general definition. Some guides will divide presentations according to the purpose—motivational, informational, persuasive, and so forth. Although your purposes should determine many choices that you'll make, any presentation requires proper attention to the three basics: content, design, and delivery.

materials. *Design* is the architecture of the slides and the graphical enhancements. *Delivery* is how you voice your message. To make the presentation great, there must be synergy of these three elements. Each of these elements carries equal weight and importance. Your presentation will not be great unless you have all three of these elements.

For example, let's say you don't do a good job researching and organizing your content, but you spend hours designing the presentation with all the bells and whistles and hours practicing your delivery. What's going to happen when you get in front of your audience? You're going to run through your presentation and it won't be interactive because you don't know more than what's on your slides. Your audience is going to pay attention to the next sound or wild animation. When someone asks you questions, you're not going to know the answers, which will severely hurt your credibility. The audience will take little or nothing back from the content of your presentation and you will look unprofessional as a presenter. By properly combining content, design, and delivery, you'll create a great presentation!

> **Mistake Proofing**
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> ### Know More than You Show
>
> You should always be ready to answer any questions that are likely to arise. However, don't assume that the members of your audience will necessarily want or need to know all that you know. As a friend once remarked, "It's not hard to know a lot of stuff; what's hard is to know what stuff to share." But if you know why you're doing the presentation and for whom, that decision gets a lot easier.

The Process

There is a process to creating that great presentation. First, you must create your content. Then, you must design for that content. Finally, you must develop your delivery strategy and style.

Content

There are some key steps to keep in mind when creating your content. First, you do your research. Then, group the information into logical categories. Finally, you create your outline. (We'll get into that in Chapter 2.)

Too often presenters don't follow those key steps. The night before a meeting, they're cramming information onto slides trying to create this great presentation. They may even be adding items to their presentation at the last minute.

To avoid the problems of late preparation and last-minute editing, think of creating the content of your presentation in terms of these three steps:

> **Don't Wrap It Up** **CAUTION!**
> Some people feel that properly preparing for a presentation means putting together a package that cannot change. But we've all attended presentations that came across as canned.
>
> Put your package together, but keep alert to any changes in the context of your presentation: new information, a shift in mood, a sense of greater interest or urgency. Don't hesitate to adjust your presentation to make it more effective by being fresh and current.

1. Do your research.
2. Group your information into logical categories.
3. Create your outline.

Design

Once you've outlined your presentation, you're ready to create your slides and add graphics, charts, and animation. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 are dedicated to helping you take your presentation from outline form to a solid complete piece of work.

Choosing Software

There are numerous presentation programs on the market, including free software. You may already have a program on your computer or your organization may use a certain program, so you don't need to choose. If you've got a choice, you can read the reviews in periodicals and on the Web. If you're unsure, it's probably wisest to go with what Gregg Keizer of (*CNET Review*, Oct. 12, 2000) called "the reigning prince of presentations … the presentation standard"— PowerPoint.

Noting that it's "slightly pricey," he recommended for smaller budgets StarOffice Impress, which is free.

I would add that I gave a rating of 5 out of 5 to Astound Presentation (*Presentations*, November 2000), noting that it contains "pretty much everything a PowerPoint junky could ever want."

Although there are other presentation programs (such as Corel Presentations, Astound Presentation, Sun Microsystem Impress, and Lotus Freelance), in this book we discuss how to create your presentation using Microsoft PowerPoint. We show you how to create the proper slide, when to use images, and the proper way to use charts. We also offer insights into creating that great presentation.

Delivery

And finally, there's the delivery. You need to know the logistics of your meeting. (We cover that subject in Chapter 7.) You need to understand how to make the participants retain your message. (Just because you're talking and participants appear to be listening does not mean there is knowledge being transferred from you to them.) You need to set clear objectives in the presentation as well as state your expectations for your audience. They need to find value in your presentation. Your presentation needs to be such that what you present and how you present it causes a change in behavior of those who attend the presentation. Maybe it's a case of helping them to better understand the long-range vision of the company; if you can get them to see it in a way that helps them embrace change, improves morale, and increases productivity, your presentation has done the job. Chapters 8 and 9 will help you deliver that great presentation that gets results.

> ### Beware the Tyranny of Your Tools
> Don't let your software dictate the content, design, and delivery of your presentation. In his online article, "The Tyranny of Presentation Software," Rick Altman warns that presentation software "dummies" down good presenters:
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> "In too many cases, presentation software has detracted from speeches, not enhanced them. …
>
> "Resist. Don't fall prey to the tyranny. Don't let the presentation software take over the presentation. If you're an experienced speaker, make sure that the software doesn't turn you into a robot. If you're not experienced, don't expect the software to save you. … Presentation software is a tool, it is not the art itself. In the hands of an artist, the tool can do wonderful things. In the wrong hands, it can turn a good speaker into a bad one, and a bad one into a dreadful one."

The Situation

Up to this point, we've been dealing with presentations in general. That may be the best way to begin a book on presentations, but it's the worst way to begin any presentation—and probably the best way to fail.

When you decide or find out that you're going to do a presentation, get all of the details. This advice might seem obvious, but some people immediately start thinking and/or worrying about what they'll do, getting at least one big step ahead of themselves before they really know where they're going.

The details that you should get will generally fall into four categories, which you can remember as the four P's:

- Purpose
- People
- Point
- Place

Purpose

Why are you doing this presentation? The full answer to that question is your purpose. And that full answer has two parts.

The first part is your subject area, the *what* of your presentation. What will you be addressing or covering? The proposed

> ### Rating Presentations
> **TRICKS OF THE TRADE** Here's how Rick Altman rates presentations ("The Tyranny of Presentation Software"):
> • *Best Presentation:* Truly excellent speaker, great ideas, and slides that amplify on the points made, instead of repeating them.
> • *Very Good:* Truly excellent speaker, great ideas, and no slides.
> • *Still OK:* Excellent speaker, redundant slides that don't add anything.
> • *Not So Good:* Bad speaker, good slides.
> • *Pretty Bad:* Bad speaker, no slides.
> • *The Worst:* Bad speaker, redundant slides.
>   As you prepare a presentation, imagine your audience rating you by this scale. How would you score?

changes in the employee manual? The recent negative media reports about the new product? The update of the company intranet?

It's essential to find out how broad or narrow your scope should be and how deep you should go—aspects that depend to a great extent on the other P's. It may be just as important to find out if there's anything that you should avoid, such as a proposal that the board is still debating or a recent resignation in the department that developed the new product.

The second part of your purpose is the reason, the *why* of your presentation. What are you expected to do? Provide information? Help participants understand? Persuade them to agree on something? Motivate them to act? Entertain them? There may be several reasons for doing the presentation. Unless you know them all, it's not likely that you'll balance and structure your presentation appropriately.

The full answer to the *why* question may not come easily—or at all. Sometimes you have to ask and then ask again—and sometimes you have to figure out the rest of the answer by yourself.

Let's take an example. The CEO asks you to provide new employees with an overview of the employee manual. It may seem that your reason is simple: to inform. But there may be other reasons behind her request. She may not mention that

she's concerned about low morale in the company and is hoping that you'll help the new hires understand the reasons behind certain unpopular policies. She may not mention that she suspects that the managers responsible for other aspects of the orientation program may have come across as serious and uncaring and is expecting that you'll be entertaining enough to change their image of the company.

The *why* of your purpose is probably as important as the *what*—and it often may be even more important. If it makes sense to ask, do so. If it's wiser to find out on your own, do so. You don't want to find out about hidden agendas or unexpressed expectations too late.

People

To whom are you delivering this presentation? The answer to that question may seem simple enough, especially if you know the target group. But make sure you know how much or how little they know about the subject of your presentation and why they need to know any more.

You might imagine yourself sitting among those people. Answer the following key questions:

- Why are you attending this presentation?
- How do you feel about attending it?
- What do you expect to get out of it?

If you can't imagine how those people would answer those questions, maybe you don't have a good enough sense of who they are. Find out more about them until you can answer those questions with confidence.

Point

What do you want to happen as a result of your presentation? That's the point, the objective.

How will the participants be different because of your presentation? In other words, what will be evidence that you succeeded, that you met your expectations?

If you know your purpose, why you're doing the presentation, you should have little trouble figuring out the point. (Now, as for reaching the point, well, that's where things get more complicated. . . .)

Place

Where are you doing the presentation? And don't settle for just a room designation—unless you know all about that location. Here some questions to answer:

- How big is the room?
- What is the layout of seats and other furniture? How much can it be changed, if needed?
- Where are you going to be in that room?
- What equipment will be in that room? A screen? A microphone? (What kind?) A podium?
- Where are the electrical outlets?
- Where is the connection for the intranet and/or Internet?
- How good is the lighting and how is it controlled?
- How well does the heating and air conditioning work?
- Are there windows? If so, how many, how big, and where are they? Is the view likely to distract participants? Are there curtains?
- Is the room relatively quiet? How likely is it that there will be disruptions?

You may not need to ask all of these questions, depending on the nature of your presentation. You may already have most or all of the answers. But it's always smartest to make sure.

Finally, a question that's related to location only in that it's also a logistics issue: How much time will you have for your presentation?

> **TRICKS OF THE TRADE**
>
> ### Post Your P's
> When you've got the answers to your questions about the situation for your presentation—purpose, people, point, and place—summarize them on an index card. Then, as you prepare your presentation, post that card with the four P's where you can conveniently use it as a touchstone to keep on track.

> ### Taming the Butterflies
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> Research shows that public speaking scares many people. If you're one of them, or if you just feel nervous, you could use the technique of visualization. This may work better the more you know about the situation for your presentation—and it's definitely more effective when you prepare well.
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> Imagine yourself beginning with confidence, making a great first impression, establishing rapport with the participants. Imagine your preparation paying off as you move through your presentation with poise, ready for anything. Choose positive, successful images of yourself and you'll feel less nervous.

Presentation Checklists

Before we move on to the chapters that get into the specifics of creating your content, designing for that content, and developing your delivery strategy and style, I think that we should start with some general guidelines for presentations. I find it helpful to use two checklists. Every time you create a presentation, I recommend that you use these checklists as guidelines for helping you to make that presentation be as effective and successful as you hope it will be.

Total Visual Checklist

The first checklist is the Total Visual Checklist. Use this one for the entire presentation. It helps you with the organization, the content, and the look of the presentation. Use this when you're reviewing your presentation as a whole.

Attribute	Description	✔
Organization		
Agenda	Present the agenda within the first three slides.	
Logical Flow	Ensure that the flow follows the agenda and is easy for the audience to follow.	
Data Clustering	Check that all information related to one topic is together.	
Account Customization	Include placeholders for account information.	

Attribute	Description	✔
Organization		
Blank or Logo Screen	Include blank or logo slides as the first and last slides of the presentation.	
Appendix	Include an appendix for easy reference for the audience.	
Hidden Slides	Use hidden slides that contain additional details; use only if needed.	
Content/Flow		
Variety	Vary the slides. For example, don't show six pie charts or six bullet slides in a row. Change slide style approximately every 3-5 slides.	
Appropriate Chart	Ensure that the type of chart you choose is the best way to display the data.	
Transitions	Build transitional phrases into your speaking notes.	
Necessity of Slide	Cut out unnecessary slides. Create hidden slides or hyperlinks to address questions that might be asked.	
Look		
Appropriate Template	Ensure that the template matches presentation objective, presentation medium, and content. Determine how best to use sidebars, titles, and footers. Determine background color: light or dark. Use best contrast: light text on dark background.	
Informative Headings	Use different headings that provide instant identification of the main point/content of slide.	
Presentation Medium	Use color, black and white, or textures in charts and graphs, based on the presentation method. For example, don't use yellow text if black and white hard copies will be left behind; yellow text can't be seen on white paper.	
Graphics	Ensure that the graphics accurately and appropriately represent the topic and message. Use appropriate graphics for your message: for a reference to something, use a symbol or clip art; for an accurate representation, use a picture or video.	

Single Visual Checklist

For each individual slide, use the Single Visual Checklist. This will help you review the organization, understanding, look, and flow for each individual slide.

Attribute	Description	✔
Organization		
Major Point	Have only one major point on each slide.	
Focal Point	Create one primary point of focus on each slide.	
Concise	Leave out information the presenter can say.	
Understanding		
Titles	Write informative titles that tell your audience the importance of the slide within three seconds.	
Illustrate	Illustrate information with charts, comparison tables, and/or pictures.	
Call Attention	Use arrows or symbols that draw attention to the important part of the chart or diagram.	
Interpretation	Build into your speaker's notes an explanation of why the data is important.	
Charts	Keep the charts simple, with a clear focus. Make sure that data points are well placed and easy to read.	
Abbreviations	Use abbreviations only when the audience will understand.	
Look		
Phrases	Use phrases; not sentences.	
Parallel Structure	Ensure that all phrases start the same way, with all verbs or all nouns.	
Limited Words	Add the fewest words needed to explain a picture or chart. Put full explanation in your speaker's notes to enable presenter to discuss.	
Fonts	Use 24-point font for text; no less than 20, if absolutely necessary. Use a sans serif type face, such as Tahoma or Arial.	
Clip Art	Use only to enhance a point; avoid cartoon clip art in most cases.	
Sizing Photos/ Clip Art	Ensure that images are sized to the appropriate scale.	
Spell Check	Check spelling of bullet points and chart information. Use software tool and check visually.	

Attribute	Description	✔
Flow		
Photographs	Ensure that there's enough memory to have photos come up quickly. Use JPEG format at a low resolution (72dpi).	
Builds	Use builds to emphasize and speak on one bullet point at a time. Choose transitions that are simple and easy on the eyes.	

Both of these checklists include information that goes beyond what is discussed in this book. So, keep these checklists handy and refer back to them often, for every presentation.

Don't worry if you don't understand all of the terms used in these checklists. We'll cover those in our discussions. I also encourage you to customize these checklists, by adding to them points that you want to remember from the chapters that follow.

Manager's Checklist for Chapter 1

❏ There are three elements to a great presentation: content, design, and delivery. *Content* includes the research and organization of materials. *Design* is the architecture of the slides and the graphical enhancements. *Delivery* is how you voice your message.

❏ Create your content in three steps: do your research, group the information into logical categories, and create your outline.

❏ Before you begin planning, know the specifics of your situation: Why are you doing this presentation? What is your subject and what is your reason? To whom are you delivering this presentation? What do you want to happen as a result of your presentation? Where are you doing the presentation? How much time will you have for your presentation?

❏ Use the Total Visual Checklist to help with the organization, the content, and the look of your presentation and the Single Visual Checklist to help with the organization, understanding, look, and flow for each individual slide.