



Paul Horn's Top 10 Tips for More Polished Presentations

1 Enlist your whole self.

Spoken messages—speeches, presentations, interviews—require a different set of skills from written communication. Mainly, it's physical energy—from your voice, your gestures, your movement, and your eye contact. You yourself are an almost inseparable part of your message—how you look, how you sound, and how you move all affect the impact of your message. An audience doesn't separate "the dancer from the dance."

2 Give yourself a strong goal or purpose for your talk, no matter how mundane the topic may seem.

Ask yourself, "At the end of my talk, what do I want my audience to do, think, feel, understand or believe?" Your own clarity about this goal or purpose will help you organize your thoughts and put energy behind them.

For example, in talking with your employees about the company's 401(k) program, think of your purpose as not simply to explain the 401(k) program but to have a majority of employees sign up for the plan, even if they just start with the minimum contribution. It's action-oriented, measurable, and therefore provides more "motivational thrust" for both you and your audience.

3 Think about your audience and ask yourself "So what?"

As you mull over the purpose of your presentation,

ask yourself what the *benefit* is for your audience. After all, that's what your listeners will be asking. They want to know "What's in it for me?" and will lose interest if you don't make that clear.

Thus, with our 401(k) example, the benefit or "So what?" you could offer your audience is not simply to understand how the plan works but, rather, that it will help them secure a comfortable retirement.

4 Be passionate. Find something...anything!...in your subject or message that you can feel passionate about—perhaps a personal experience (your own or someone else's) relevant to the topic.

The experience itself can be happy, sad, inspiring, amusing or frustrating. Whatever the emotion, this passion will energize you and help you make a connection with your audience.

5 Keep it simple. Let's face it, most of us don't retain much information for very long.

Sometimes we're distracted or preoccupied. So, as speakers, our job is to motivate our listeners by presenting a limited number of points as clearly, succinctly and colorfully as possible. Our audience can usually find more detailed information later if they're motivated. But too much information in a talk can obscure the main points and leave people feeling confused, tired, irritated or all of those! So focus on key points and illustrations that are meaningful to your audience.

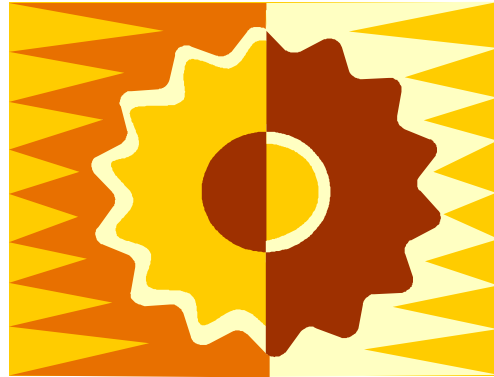
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Returning to our example, you might say: “Let’s assume you make \$40,000. Under our plan you can put up to 10% of your salary, or \$4,000, into your 401 (k) plan. Since the company will match your contribution 50 cents to the dollar, or \$2,000, you can save a total of \$6,000 for the year. And remember, those contributions will not be taxed until you withdraw them during retirement when you’ll most likely be in a lower tax bracket! Now, here’s the clincher: Our next slide shows you the advantage of saving under the 401(k) plan with taxes deferred, rather than in a regular savings plan, assuming an interest rate of 6%.”

6 Make it colorful. Use appropriate stories, personal anecdotes, analogies, and/or quotations to enliven your material and engage the audience on an emotional level. We’re always better at remembering colorful stories than information or abstract principles by themselves. For instance, you could say: “So one of our employees stopped me in the hall the other day with a very skeptical look on his face, his arms crossed against his chest, his head cocked back, and asked, ‘Did you say the company would *match* my contribution?’”

7 Vary your pace. This will aid your audience’s comprehension, help you catch your breath if you tend to talk quickly, and check for understanding or agreement. Pauses or brief silences can be very powerful, and they’re especially effective at key transition points.

8 Manage your visual aids — don’t let them manage you. Many of us are “visual” learners, and certain information does lend itself better to pictures or diagrams than to verbal expression, so visual aids do have their place. But use them sparingly—to highlight and support, not to deliver, your message. Beware the seductions of PowerPoint, as well as old-fashioned overheads—they tempt us to put too much information on a slide and to use too many slides in the first place. Above all, don’t *read* your slides or overheads to your



audience—your listeners will find that tedious and even annoying. Finally, keep that connection with your audience alive and look at them when you’re speaking, not at your visual aid. No one wants to look at the back of your head for very long.

9 Open and close with energy and conviction. Openings and closings are often what our audiences remember most, so use them to your advantage. Make strong choices. In opening, be a little bold and provocative when you can (taking into account your audience). The famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright once opened a speech to a large VIP audience in Pittsburgh by saying, “This is the ugliest city I have ever seen.” You don’t necessarily have to go that far (and probably wouldn’t want to unless you have certain credentials), but attention-grabbers upfront are important. Likewise, try to give your closing more than the traditional, polite “Thank you.” Use the closing as a call to action by saying something like: “So, think of all that you want from your retirement—whether it’s spending time with your grandchildren, hiking the Grand Tetons, pattering around the garden, or teeing off at your favorite golf course. Start with just a small contribution if you want, but sign up today.”

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10 Savor the Q & A. Question and answer periods may be challenging, especially if you face a hostile audience, but they're also an opportunity to test for understanding and acceptance, reinforce your key message, address misunderstandings or objections, and to learn something new yourself. A few pointers:

- ◆ Give yourself time to listen, think and respond; your silence may seem an eternity to you, but you will appear thoughtful to your audience.
- ◆ If your response requires more than a quick sentence or two, make eye contact with others in the audience to hold their attention.
- ◆ With large groups, repeat or paraphrase the question to make sure everyone has heard it; this also gives you more time to gather your thoughts and formulate your reply.
- ◆ Whenever possible, use your answer to bridge back to your main theme or key message, especially if the question challenges your message, as in this example:

Q: Haven't a lot of people lost their shirts with their 401(k) plans?

A: Thank you, yes, some people have experienced serious losses with their 401(k) investments. Of course, all investments carry a certain degree of risk, but when people "lose their shirts," it's almost always because they made investment choices that were too risky. Typically, they invested too much of their money in one particular company or industry rather than diversifying or spreading out their risk. That's what happened to a lot of Enron employees, as you know. However, our 401(k) plan will give you the tools you need to make sensible choices plus the advantages of tax-deferral and regular matching contributions from the company.

- ◆ Anticipate questions and have one or two in mind that you can pose on your own if you sense your audience may be reticent to speak up but eager to know more.
- ◆ Make sure, too, that you aren't packing up your equipment or materials when you ask for questions. This may signal that you aren't really very interested in taking questions and just want to make a quick exit.

As these 10 tips suggest, good presentations are in some ways like good one-on-one conversations: energetic, animated and compelling. As you become more conscious of good speaking habits that you and others demonstrate in ordinary conversational settings, you'll be able to absorb and transfer these to more formal speaking situations.

Here's one last piece of advice: Find a way to videotape yourself delivering a talk, then review your performance with a friend or two who can offer honest, constructive feedback. Note what you do well and what you can improve. Focus on one or two behaviors you can practice and improve on for your next presentation--your eye contact, for example, or your use of visual aids. Don't worry about being "perfect." Just concentrate on delivering what any audience appreciates: a lively, interesting message that clearly conveys "what's in it for them."

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Paul Horn offers individual coaching and group workshops in public speaking, presentation skills and other areas of personal and business communication. He draws on his background as both an urban planner and an actor specializing in corporate training and marketing programs produced for video, film, CD or the web.