

The Ultimate Business Presentation Guide
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—Deliver Your Message With Real Impact —

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Business Presentations: Corporate Haiku for the 21st Century

Business presentations aren't just for big, formal business meetings anymore. Today business presentations—a series of screens (or printouts of screens) containing headings, subheads, bullets, and graphics—are used for a wide range of corporate communications. They appear at the most mundane staff meetings, in lieu of reports, as part of business plans, as marketing collateral materials, sales props, and more. In short, business presentations have become the business communications medium of the 21st century—corporate haiku to express ideas, simple or complex, quickly and (we hope) effectively.

The emergence of software like Microsoft's PowerPoint has made pretty painless the process of producing a business presentation with a slick, polished look. With myriad backgrounds and foregrounds, fonts and typefaces, bullet styles, graphics, clipart libraries, charts, screen effects, and more, it is easy to take to produce an attractive presentation.

But just as easy-to-use word processing programs don't turn every user into an effective writer, so too presentation tools like PowerPoint don't automatically enable you to turn out effective, compelling presentations. To the contrary, often the capabilities of the presentation tools mask weak ideas and poorly conceived and delivered messages. The attractiveness of the resulting presentation actually is superficial and any impact is decidedly short-lived; as soon as anyone looks beyond the production and examines the content of the presentation, the weaknesses become apparent. The presentation may be banal or utterly predictable or downright confusing. Often it undercuts the very messages the presenter wants to communicate.

This does not need to be the case. Although creating an effective business presentation is a serious communications challenge, any reasonably intelligent person can do it. That is what this guide is intended to do—to show you how to:

Combine a persuasive, logical narrative with engaging delivery to create an effective business presentation

Identify and focus your message

Support it with tight, succinct writing and appropriate graphics

Involve the audience and motivate them to take action

The result is a business presentation that becomes a powerful mechanism to advance the organization's objectives as well as the presenter's career.

This report focuses on the content—the message—of the presentation. It is not a tutorial on using PowerPoint. Rather, it aims to guide you in developing content of your presentation. It offers ideas on how to assemble your message into a compelling narrative, how to avoid predictability or audience boredom, and how to ensure that the audience follows the progression of your thoughts and, in the end, gets your message. In addition, it provides a sample outline that you can use as a starting point. Finally, it describes how to take advantage of opportunities to present at business conferences.

Full disclosure: my experience comes out of content development and message creation. As a freelance writer specializing in business and technology, I have developed the content of business presentations for a wide range of companies, including Digital Equipment Corp., Compaq, Microsoft, Symantec, and more.

Start with the Audience

Most people start creating a presentation by jotting down their main message points or laying out a PowerPoint screen format. I start by analyzing the audience and the situation.

The key question: who is the audience? The audience may be the board of directors, a group of department heads, the CEO, some dithering committee, your project team, a roomful of professional peers, bored reporters, prospective clients, consumers, government regulators, the general public, almost anyone.

Whoever it is, you must thoroughly understand the audience and its likely attitude toward the message of your presentation. At the least, you need to assess:

How much they already know about this subject or issue

What else they need or want to know about it

Why they should care

How receptive or resistant they will be to your message

What are their objections, concerns, and interests

What you want them to do when they leave the presentation

These questions make a good start. You can and should go deeper. How technical is the audience? How distracted will they be? How tired? The list is endless, but you get the picture. In short, you want to know as much as you can about the audience so you can address them on their terms, not yours.

It also helps to know the situation. Is the presentation to be made before a small, informal gathering or in a large forum? Private or public? Friends or strangers? Supporters or adversaries? Will the audience be fatigued or bored? How long will you have to speak? Are questions allowed? Encouraged? Prohibited? Who else will be speaking and what are they likely to say?

Once you've collected as much information about the audience and situation as you can and analyzed it, you're ready to work on the actual content of your presentation. Now you can jot down ideas.

Solid Ideas Make Good Presentations

A smart creative director at a large advertising agency exhorted his staff to make the layouts rough and the ideas finished. This, of course, runs counter to the prevailing ad agency practice when, even today, ad agencies try to disguise the flimsiest of ideas with lavish production. The same is true with business presentations; many attempt to mask weak ideas with dazzling computer graphics and special effects.

To paraphrase the creative director, for business presentations you want to make your screen designs rough and your ideas finished. The business presentation must start with something worthwhile to say and then say it persuasively.

Business presentations work best when you are introducing new ideas or information or insights. Business presentations usually are promoting an idea or a product or a position and should reflect topnotch salesmanship in the best sense of the word. (Tutorials—how-to presentations—are a different beast and should reflect the best pedagogy.) To make sure your business presentation message is worthwhile, put it to the following test:

Why am I talking about this—what is the problem or issue to be addressed?

What am I adding to the discussion—is it new or illuminating or provocative?

What does it mean in the end—what value will people walk away with?

So what—does your message create a sense of urgency, importance, involvement, excitement?

Start formulating your message as an outline. The outline, a sequence of headings and successively indented subheadings, enables you to assemble a cogent message without the distraction of types, fonts, graphics, and all the rest. It allows you to concentrate on what you have to say and to organize it in a coherent way. If your message comes across as confusing or vacuous in the outline form, all the dazzling presentation graphics in the world won't disguise it for long. Straightforward narratives tend to work best; digressions will lose the audience unless you make it clear you are taking them off on a tangent and how it is related to the main message. And should you digress, be sure you bring the audience back to the main point. Don't leave them lost and abandoned in some wilderness.

Presentations work best when they focus on one primary message. Subsequent messages should support the primary message. Once you have laid out your main and secondary or supporting messages, fill them in with proof points, details, and examples. Audiences generally like specifics.

Then you're ready to put your message into presentation format. The outline easily translates into a finished slide presentation. In general, each section of the outline represents a section of the presentation. Each heading is a screen. Third-, fourth-, and fifth-level indented subheads become screen bullets. Then you can throw in charts, graphics, and effects that clarify and amplify your message. A sample outline is provided below.

Presentation Content Basics

If you attend the various speaker training sessions and business presentation seminars, you will frequently encounter pearls of wisdom that seem to have become the gospel. The one that immediately comes to mind is the repetition rule: tell the audience what you are going to say, then say it, and then tell them what you told them.

Although the intention is good, the repetition rule if not executed with skill and sensitivity to the audience will bludgeon them in a stupor, which can't be good for your message.

A better rule is this: practice good salesmanship in the best sense of the word. Almost every business presentation is a sales pitch, usually more informative than hard sell but a sales pitch nonetheless promoting an idea, proposition, position, organization, or product. As a result, I try to build presentations around a handful of key elements adopted from best salesmanship practices. These include:

Focus—clearly define the problem or issue that is at the heart of the presentation so everyone understands what this presentation is about

Audience—keep the audience's needs, interests, concerns, and attention foremost

Importance—establish the importance or urgency of the issue so the audience knows why they should care

Authority—establish your credibility on the topic

Validation—cite third-party studies, research, data, and references that reinforce your message

Experience—cite real life examples, case studies, and testimonials that illustrate your message

Interaction—find opportunities to directly engage the audience in the presentation

Graphics—include charts, images, diagrams, media to amplify and clarify your message points

Response—direct the audience members on what they can or should do next in regard to the subject of the presentation

Any given presentation will include some if not all of these elements. You arrange them in a compelling narrative that engages the audience and communicates your message.

Eyes Glazed Over: Avoiding Audience Boredom

The use of business presentations is so pervasive and the number of poorly conceived and executed presentations is so great that audience fatigue—eyes glazed over—is a real concern. This fatigue factor must be one of the issues driving the use of increasingly spiffy graphics and animation, but even that solution has its limitations. It doesn't take long for the graphical pyrotechnics to overwhelm the business message and undermine any hope for effective communication.

The fatigue factor results in part from rigid, unimaginative adherence to the repetition rule. However, this needn't be the case. Here are some of the tricks I prefer to spice up a presentation:

Engage the audience right away—ask provocative questions, take a poll, play a game, anything to actively involve the audience. (One manager starts his technology presentations by leading the audience in a brief yoga exercise.)

Invite questions throughout the presentation—don't wait for questions at the end.

Insert a demonstration—where the topic allows, try some hands-on activity.

Use anecdotes and humor—there is no rule that presentations, no matter how serious, have to be utterly dry. Personal anecdotes and natural humor keep the audience engaged.

Dramatize the issue—rather than talk about the issue use role-playing to actually dramatize it. You can even draft audience members to play some of the roles.

Look beyond a talking head—take the time allotted to the presentation to run a panel discussion or stage a skit. (One executive of a major telecommunications company based his keynote address on the late-night TV talk show format with himself in the Jay Leno/Dave Letterman role, all cleverly scripted of course.)

Obviously not every topic, situation, or message lends itself to these approaches, but wherever you can break with usual presentation, within reason, you are better off. Your message will stand out, and your audience will appreciate the change.

Constructing the Actual Presentation

Start the development of the actual presentation content with the outline. As noted above, the outline translates very neatly into screens and bullets. The only things you need to add are some charts and graphics to illustrate key points and your speaker's notes (the speaker's text) to keep you on the message. However, you do have some important decisions to make at this point.

One decision revolves around your approach to screen headers, subheads, and bullets. There are two primary schools of thought on the topic, the short school and the long school.

The short school believes headers, subheads, and bullets should be brief, bordering on cryptic, and relies on the presenter to fill in the details. This works very well as long as a capable presenter always accompanies the presentation. But very often business presentations have a life that goes beyond the actual presentation. (I encourage my clients to plan and prepare for this extended life.) They may be used as a leave-behind or may make their ways into the hands of customers, prospects, reporters, government regulators, or anyone else. A presentation consisting of cryptic headers and bullets will not communicate effectively without the presenter.

The long school insists that headers, subheads, and bullets be long enough to convey a complete thought. That means a full sentence, sometimes longer. In this way each screen can deliver a complete message even without the presenter. Someone can, in effect, view the presentation as a document that stands on its own and come away with the core message. The role of the presenter is to elaborate on the core message and entertain and engage the initial audience.

This isn't something to get religious about although I tend to favor the long school because I believe you should get as much use out of the presentation as possible. That means using it as a leave-behind, as an element in an information packet for prospective customers or the media, or as a sales tool for use by others. Still, the choice of one approach or the other really depends on the intended use and the presenter.

The other big decision revolves around the use of graphics and special effects. Again, two camps. One camp argues that we live in a visual media world where graphics and special effects take precedent. The other camp counters that graphics and effects should serve only to enhance and clarify the core message, that you should not risk overwhelming the message and the presenter with snazzy graphics and dazzling effects. I tend to favor restrained use of graphics and special effects unless the graphics and effects are the message. Graphics can help, but you don't want to overdue it and end up overshadowing or upstaging your message.

Model Presentation Outline

The following is an outline template for a general presentation such as would be given at a professional or industry conference.

I've suggested further areas to improvise within brackets [].

Part I: Introduction

- What this presentation is about
- Why it's important
- Presentation agenda
 - What you are going to tell them
 - What they will get out of it
 - Your credentials for talking about this
- [engage the audience, pose a provocative question]

Part II: Background

- Review the issue
- Why we are talking about this now
- Introduce references, citations for validation, substantiation
- Reference appropriate research
- [invite audience discussion]

Part III: the Main Point

- Introduce your main point in a series of screens and bullets
- Add supporting material to back up your point
- [add anecdotes, examples, demonstrations]
- Invite questions

Parts IV, V, and Beyond

- Introduce subsequent points in order of importance
- Relate the discussion to your main point and primary message
- Add appropriate supporting material for each point
- Invite questions following each point

Conclusion

- Summarize your main message and key points
- [pose a provocative question, invite discussion]
- Take any remaining questions
- Direct audience members on their next move
- Thank the audience

Obviously, the specific topic, material, and situation will dictate the content and flow of the presentation. Feel welcome to use this template as a starting point and modify it as you please.

The Public Business Presentation Opportunity

The vast majority of business presentations are private affairs, delivered to audiences large or small within the organization or to various stakeholders (customers, investors, reporters, industry analysts, regulators, etc.). Of course, these presentations can be very important and merit well-written content with carefully crafted messages.

There also is a large opportunity to deliver presentations at the innumerable industry, professional, and trade conferences held each year. These conferences represent a tremendous opportunity for the presenter to get his or her message out to a large and important constituency.

Presenting at one of these conferences can advance a career, boost sales, or win support for an idea or position. For that reason, many organizations use public presentations as a key element in their marketing strategy. To capitalize on these opportunities, it is imperative the presenter has a well-crafted presentation, one that effectively communicates the message as it engages the audience.

The process of getting invited to present at a conference is similar to getting an article published in a magazine. Typically, you submit your presentation idea in the form of an abstract along with your professional credentials to the program director of the appropriate conference. Plan ahead; presenters are usually lined up months in advance. And be forward thinking so your topic won't seem stale or dated when you finally deliver it 6-8 months after you initially proposed the idea.

Just as there are public relations agencies that focus on placing articles in print publications, there are specialized agencies that track the multitude of conferences, cultivate relationships with conference organizers, and place their clients as presenters at appropriate conferences. These agencies will help the presenter refine the topic, target the appropriate conferences, and prepare the abstract. They will also, if requested, help the presenter develop the actual presentation.

Delivering the Presentation

- Test the setup in advance
- Keep it short.
- Keep it moving
- Involve the audience
- Speak to the audience
- Make eye contact
- Smile occasionally
- Ask for questions
- Thank the audience

Creating an effective presentation is a time consuming task, not unlike writing a major research paper or white paper but with a little theatrics thrown in just to further complicate things. Although managers and executives could create their own presentations, few have the time to devote to the task or experience in creating public presentations.

Instead, they turn to staff writers or, increasingly, to outside writers like me. An experienced and knowledgeable outside writer not only is more cost effective than diverting internal staff or executives from their primary work but also brings to your presentation material the critical missing ingredient—the audience perspective that ensures the presentation hits its mark, which is what the whole effort is about.

As a fulltime independent writer/researcher/analyst specializing in business and technology, I work with companies on a wide range of projects, from business presentations to white papers, case studies to ROI guides. I have developed a number of presentations for both internal and public use for a variety of companies. You can request an example of a business presentation, in PowerPoint format, by contacting me at radding@mediaone.net or 617-332-4369.

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