

Harry Witchel shows how to make a slide presentation come alive

How to avoid death by Powerpoint

For anyone in the communications business, Powerpoint presentations are a fact of life. But far too often they're a missed opportunity, with the presenter failing to deliver the goods and the audience left looking at their watches waiting for it all to end. Whether you're pitching to a potential new client or delivering an internal report, Powerpoint can be incredibly powerful tool; but only if you know how to use it effectively.

Often, watching how a speaker behaves during a Powerpoint presentation is more revealing than anything on the slides. The flip side of the coin is that you cannot hide behind your slides. The presentation is about you, and it often fashions people's first impression of you. It can make that breakthrough moment when your boss starts respecting you, because people take seriously people who are being taken seriously. Being watched elevates you, but not if you're boring your audience.

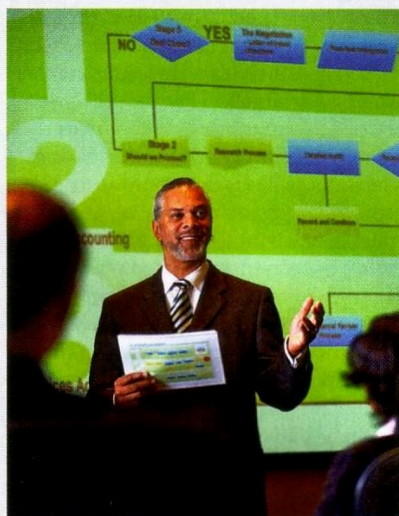
Engaging people with your ideas depends to a massive extent on how you use your voice and body. While there is an "open and engaged" manner that body language gurus profess, there is no decree saying that everyone has to stand straight, with their arms in an open position, gazing around the crowd or just slightly above it. I have seen riveting presentations where the presenter was slightly hunched over, looking at the floor, or obviously shy. The truth is that almost any image, if you nail it, can be a winning look, from self-absorbed professor to bashful apprentice.

The Three Commandments

While there are no commandments for what you must do, there are some inviolable laws for what you must avoid. You must not be hard to hear clearly. This is absolutely rule number 1. It may seem too trivial to note, but how many presenters ask in advance about lapel microphones or background noise like air conditioning? You must not be uncomfortable in an adolescent way. To avoid reminding your audience of an embarrassed teenager, don't lean, pirouette

halfway, and mumble all at once. Finally, you must not flaunt the back of your head. There is a time limit for how long you can look away from the audience, and it depends on how long your slides will keep them interested.

If your slides engross the audience, they will never notice the back of your head, so you could look at your slides indefinitely. Sadly, most slides only telegraph short messages, which is a problem if you are shy and want to disappear under your slides. Where you look governs your relationship with the audience – they look where your eyes tell them to. When you look at your slides, they look at your slides. When you look at the audience, they look at you. When you look at your notes, they look at your notes – only they can't read them and you can. Briefly referring to your notes looks precise, but reading verbatim from your notes can feel alienating – as if the real speech is on the notes and the speaker is only the messenger-boy.



"Powerpoint can be incredibly powerful tool; but only if you know how to use it effectively"

Tweaking Timing

Timing is everything, especially with the rate of speech. When people are restless during a talk, it is most often remedied by going faster or slower. The perceptive speaker will respond to agitation by doing the opposite of whatever he or she was just doing, like a dodgem swinging round after impact. It is unnecessary to diagnose the problem, as testing this solution is quick and imperceptible to the audience. Changing from fast to slow will give you more gravitas, while going from slow to fast will make you more urgent or clever.

More generally, after 15 to 20 minutes it is refreshing to change gears to revitalise the audience. The unbeatable change is to swap speakers, if you have that luxury. Changing the lighting is a respite – justified by a movie needing the lights dimmed, or a visual demonstration requiring the lights to come up. High risk strategies such as asking for a volunteer will instantly regain everyone's attention, although orthodox tactics such as changing topic usually suffice.

Rehearse for Questions

Handling questions can be your date with destiny, showering you with glory or infamy. Not only is the Q&A directly related to what most interests the audience, but because they are about to leave, how you handle the questions forms everyone's final impression of you. Some devious speakers plant their first question in a big audience, but a more honest stance is to rehearse a strategy for handling questions where you do not know the answer. This is essential because the Q&A is like a landmine for problems with confidence. Whatever the dodge you choose, from "we are working on that and are expecting an answer on Friday" to "nobody on earth knows the answer to that", it has to be delivered with conviction. If there are wolves that smell blood, you have to move toward them with confidence.

Harry Witchel is a leading body language expert

Harry Witchel on how to read body language to determine status, confidence, autonomy, and to spot the real boss

Who's the daddy?

A knowledge of body language can be priceless when facing a team or committee, because the most influential person might not be the nominal boss. This month's column considers some non-verbal tactics for exposing the pivotal person in a team or committee, and what to do with that knowledge.

For clarity, let's stick to situations where you or your team are in conversation with another team; advice for a formal presentation - any meeting with PowerPoint or an uninterrupted speech - would be somewhat different.

Watch their eyes

Before you start, rehearse for five minutes with a colleague to make sure your basic body language is kosher: no fidgeting, no shifting posture nervously, and no averting your gaze anxiously.

Once in the meeting, it is revealing to keep track of where your opposite numbers gaze when you are speaking, especially noticing when they look at each other. You will see myriad clues about status, confidence and autonomy.

Set the trap

If your opposites are not looking at each other, it may be time to help them along. My clients report the best results when they flush out their listeners' hierarchy by asking a question about values. People will almost always look at, or defer to, the boss.

A classic example of a question that will tap into their values is, "What is important to you about [relevant topic, eg transport in your district]?" This question launches the conversation into high level philosophy, and very few employees will risk bungling the answer in front of their boss; those that do will be very confident, autonomous, or both. This strategy also works as a fast way of fishing for 'hot words' - powerful words that distil your opponents' own ethos - directly from the boss's mouth.

Having their hot words will give you phenomenal leverage, and any gambit that un-

covers them gets my full seal of approval: ask your listeners directly, attend to their verbal stresses, or monitor their posture. They are giving so much away, constantly. That's why, when your side is speaking, somebody on your team should be watching the other side for these 'magic buttons'. And not all buttons are happy ones. It's a minefield out there, and when people suddenly lean back or cross their arms, it means that that topic of conversation is leading them to bad feelings and objections.

Pre-empt objections

With objections, prevention is better than cure. If you are going to say something to which they will definitely have an objection, the most graceful approach is to pre-empt that objection. Pitch your argument directly

to the most open person in their group.

If you speak directly to a resistant boss, he or she will focus all their energy on resisting, but when you are speaking persuasively to someone else, the boss is more likely to listen in to what you are saying. You get extra points if the resistant boss watches his own ally slowly accepting your ideas. It looks more natural if you begin by specifically engaging the open person just before making your points.

The timing of your pre-emptive strike is fairly critical, it should come after the boss has started obsessing about the objection - any sooner and your pitch goes backward, while leaving it until later means the boss's objection will block out everything else like a broken record. If they aren't obsessing, and they don't look negative or stuck in an objection, don't bring it up until they do.

There are different styles of where to look while speaking, and you may want to adapt your gaze to minimise your listeners' resistance: a confident speaker regularly returns his or her gaze to the previous questioner (or to the boss). By contrast, an inclusive speaker punctuates his or her sentences with eye movements to take in each member of the opposing team. One caveat: unlike when listening, normal people look away about half the time when speaking. This helps them to formulate their thoughts and to keep others from interrupting.

Move them

You can knock sullen people out of a rut by politely taking control of their bodies. Hand them physical objects to engage their team members, especially when their arms are crossed. The moment they unblock their arms and lean forward they are open to your arguments. It is worth remembering that body language is a two-way street; scientists have shown that if you change their body language, you change their minds. Scary.

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