

LOEB Senior Consultant on ...

Presentation Techniques Are Necessary—Even for a Veteran

by Donna Gentry

I am standing behind a podium in a medium sized conference room in a London law firm. Sitting before me are 30 strangers to whom I am to give a PowerPoint presentation regarding an organization about which I am passionate and knowledgeable. I planned to talk about the history of the organization, the benefits of networking with colleagues, the knowledge sharing that makes our jobs easier, the recent technology changes that made communication within the organization effortless....however, I never got to any of it.

The first slide appeared overhead and I was unable to speak. I was completely and utterly frozen -- unable to move. What makes this even more bizarre is that I have been an actress for most of my life and performed stand-up comedy for more than 10 years in NYC nightclubs. I am not new to standing in front of an audience and making a presentation. So, what went wrong that day? Well, a number of things, I was stressed, and worried about the text. I focused on the text completely. I labored until the last minute on editing and adjusting every word I was going to say and spent no time on preparation. Come on people, I've been doing this for 1,000 years - I know how to present! Besides, I had passion, and I had confidence – what else do you need? I just *knew* the presentation portion would go well so, I didn't focus on my prep. No, I spent time writing and rewriting – because my words were going to convince the audience that this organization was so fantastic they would want to join! What a rookie move on my part.

There is an old saying, "Drama is easy; comedy is hard." It's true! It looks like Robin Williams gets up on stage and just starts this crazy stream of consciousness that spontaneously came to him while standing there. But, in fact, the man works really hard to make it look like that. Williams is known for going to comedy clubs unannounced. He spends gads of time working and honing a routine or bit for months before it is incorporated into his act. His act is well rehearsed, planned and crafted. In other words, lots of preparation goes into it. As administrators, you aren't going to be doing stand-up comedy, however, the same principles and preparation applies for a great presentation.

So, what makes for a good presentation? Lots of things...just take a moment to think about a really amazing speaker you may have recently seen. What made them great?! I bet some of the things you thought about were their voice, the text, their body language and the visuals, like photos, slides or props. Do you know the 93% rule? It's what people focus on during a presentation. 55% of the time people focus on appearance and body language of the speaker. 38% of the time people focus on tone, pitch and pace of the speaker's voice. So, that leaves about 7%. The audience spends all of that magical 7% of the time focusing on text. All my time and energy went into 7% of my audi-

ence's focus. AUGH!

So, let's think about it for a second. How often do you look at notes after listening to a keynote speaker, and see that you have written down a couple of sentences? That's ok. You got a couple of nuggets! However, if that same keynote speaker has knocked your socks off during the presentation, you can passionately relate to the theme of the presentation, remember the name of the speaker, describe their presence and leave feeling inspired and changed! Why is that? It is because the speaker chose vocal modulation for interest, posture and gesture for impact and emphasis and took the audience on a ride. Together the speaker and audience shared a journey that was rich with emotion and inspiration because of carefully crafted vocal and visual impact on the speaker's part.

Now, think about a speaker that wasn't inspiring... what were they like? What do they do differently? Things that spring to mind for me are people who either spend their time standing still or pacing and walking. How about those who speak too softly, too fast, or in a monotone? Or, perhaps they were gesturing wildly or fidgeting with hair or papers. All these distractions lead to a poor presentation because I, as the audience, can't focus on the message or feel a connection with the speaker. All my time is spent being distracted by the speaker's lack of vocal emphasis, annoying tics and twitches or I am working too hard to strain to hear or struggling to stay awake due to lack of interest.

I have a friend who is an experienced speaker. She is a pro. Has been doing her job as a presenter for decades and yet, sometimes, she speaks so fast you can't understand her. She gets excited and engaged and LOVES her job. I mean, she eats, sleeps and breathes this stuff! Everyone loves her and engages with her immediately. However, on occasion when she is presenting, she will sometimes speak at the speed of light, which means, the audience has to struggle to keep up. So, even folks with years of experience must remember to prepare. For my friend it means taking a moment to check that breathing, pitch and pace are on target before stepping up to a podium. Just a few seconds of prep can mean the difference between a great presentation and a struggle for the audience.

How many of us have had the opportunity to see ourselves during presentations? You can practice in front of a mirror but it's not as effective as having a tape or disc to watch and objectively critique. If you have the opportunity to have yourself taped, do it! Then take the time – really take the time - to look at yourself objectively, as an audience member might. What goes on in our heads and what is seen by the audience are vastly different.

When you do view the disc, note your posture, energy, vocal quality and gesture. What is working? What could you do differently to be more effective? Try to incorporate these changes each chance you have to make a presentation. You will be able to see and understand very clearly your personal challenges and successes and make minor tweaks or major adjustments toward success.

So let's go back to the 93% rule and you. If 55% is body language, then you need to make the most of it. When reviewing your disc, notice your stance. What are you doing physically when you make a presentation? Are you gesturing or standing stock still? Do you move around too much or too little? Do you project the image of a strong, confident presenter? Are you focused and upright? Do you move around at the right moments to make a point? The thing to keep in mind through all these questions is, *am I comfortable* and doing what is natural to me and my style while at the same time, making a positive physical impact? Just becoming physically comfortable in front of people takes time and practice. Try it at home with friends and family to be aware of your natural physical style. Be comfortable in your skin yet have that dash of professionalism for strength and credibility.

This brings us to the 38% of the formula which is vocal cues. There are four Ps in great vocal technique. **Pause, Projection, Pace and Pitch.** Use vocal techniques wisely and effectively and you will have your audience's attention for a much longer period and, they will remember more of what you said.

Pause: Bob Newhart has made a career of pausing. He uses dramatic pause before delivering his punchlines which, creates just the right amount of tension and interest to reel the audience in and hook them. So, first thing to remember when speaking, sometimes a bit of silence can be golden. Pausing at important points, causes people to perk up and pay attention because they sense that you are about to say something they need to remember.

Projection: If you want to be heard clearly, you must project, even with a good sound system. Projection is consciously pushing out, or expanding your diaphragm area with your stomach muscles when you breathe in, and then continuing to "push out" with those muscles as you talk. This allows you to take in more air when you breathe, and to move it out more forcefully while talking. Never used your diaphragm before? Here is a trick - lie down on the floor and place a couple of heavy books on your abdomen. Relax and breathe normally, while keeping your eye on the books. Notice that every time you breathe in, your abdomen pushes the books up. This is the diaphragm working to make room for your lungs to expand as they take in air. The same thing happens when we are standing up; we just don't notice it as much. Using your diaphragm allows your voice to be stronger,

clearer, more confident, and easily heard at the back of the room and, saves wear and tear on your vocal chords, because the air is doing more of the work and taking stress off of the muscles in your throat.

Pace: The speed at which you deliver a sentence and sometimes even each word ... in ... a ... sentence can be very effective. Slowing down your words creates interest by generating a dramatic effect. Speeding-up-as-you-move-into-an-important-point-can-create-EXCITEMENT! Vary your pace to ensure people will keep listening and can keep pace with you. Talking at the same pace for extended periods becomes hypnotic; it will literally put your audience to sleep!

Pitch: It comes naturally to change pitch when you vary speeds. It is natural for your voice to grow softer and lower when you are speaking slowly to emphasize an important point. And natural for your voice to get louder and rise in pitch when you speaking quickly about something exciting. Changing pitch levels can alter the emotional mood of your message, and have people sitting on the edge of their seats.

The thing to remember about each of the four Ps is that, again, they must flow in a natural rhythm with your message. People will get tired of being jerked around and manipulated by start and stop, up and down, loud and soft, unless these changes come at times and in ways that make sense with your message.
James A. Baker, Author: The Anger Busting Workbook

So, we are down to the last 7% of the formula: text. Be knowledgeable regarding your topic. Be prepared with information but be willing to have fun. Write it, set it down, look at it again, edit it, set it down – do this over time not in one sitting. I often will have a friend review it so I have a fresh set of eyes looking over your shoulder. Then reread it until you feel happy that if you lose your place for some reason you can easily pick up again by re-focusing.

I froze that day because I didn't take the time to think about how I was going to deliver my first sentence. I hadn't thought about how I was going to get my message across. I had not figured out where my high and low points were happening. I had no idea where to start the journey. And, presenting it is a journey. You are asking someone to come along with you, listen to a story, remember that story and, be affected by it. Why else would you share this information with others? I was at sea that day. I excused myself from the podium and asked everyone to enjoy the beautiful buffet lunch and asked that we mingle a bit and chat informally about the organization, because I knew I would not be effective at the podium. I made some great connections for the organization informally but, more importantly that day, I learned to *always* prepare for the journey.

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Donna Gentry, a senior consultant with Loeb Consulting Group, LLC, is a legal industry professional with more than twenty years experience with national and international law firms. Clients include top tier firms and other large organizations that place a priority on creating, enhancing and maintaining collaborative work cultures through open, candid and clear communication.

Donna's expertise in leadership training, employee relations, and performance management has resulted in a proven track record for motivating outstanding performances in employees and guiding the successful career development of managers. Donna facilitates workshops focused on management development, team building, enhanced communication skills, presentation skills and performance management. A member of the Association of Legal Administrators from 1999 through 2007, Donna was Co-Chair of the NYC Chapter's Education Committee and served as Vice President on the ALA NYC Chapter Board. Donna was a panel speaker (*How to Handle Difficult People, Situations and Issues*) at the first annual NYC ALA Symposium.

She is also a certified DiSC Trainer and currently serves on the Boards of the Newberg Education Foundation and Willamette Shakespeare and is a member of Newberg EarlyBird Rotary.

