Tips for Great Presentations

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IN THIS INSTALLMENT of The Essentials, I cover several tips for successful conference or meeting presentations. With the Summit around the corner, these tips can help you develop your content, boost your confidence, and impress your audience. Many of these tips will also apply to work presentations.

Getting Started

A great presentation starts with planning and organization. The very first thing you should do is decide what you want the audience to learn about your topic, then make a list of what you need to cover to achieve that goal. One method you can use to organize your presentation is to write each point you want to cover on a sticky note, then group the related points together. From there, themes will emerge and you can develop your structure and flow. Use additional sticky notes for each chart and graphic you will need, as well as all your references. Now you are ready to build your slides.

Preparing Your Slides

It is a given that slides should not be a wall of words that compete for the audiences' attention, but there are other things to keep in mind when putting your slide deck together.

Using slide animations can be a good way to pace your delivery and keep the audience focused, but keep the effect you choose (for example, "fly in from the right") consistent and avoid anything distracting or dizzying. If your presentation is going to be broadcast, check with the organizers about using animations. Sometimes the animations will lag behind the audio and the remote audience will be out of sync with the live one. If you are advised to avoid animations, consider breaking your content up into additional slides. You can achieve the pace you want while making both audiences happy.

Photos can make your slides more interesting, but you should avoid using anything that is copyrighted. Two sources for photos: Flickr (search for those tagged with the "Commercial Use and Mods Allowed" license and follow the terms) at *flickr.com/explore* and the New York Public Library at *nypl.org/blog/2016/01/05/share-public-domain-collections.*

This column is a quick reference guide exploring "essential" technical communication topics. Please send questions or comments to Nicky Bleiel at *nableiel@us.ibm.com.* Follow her on Twitter: *@nickybleiel.*

If you create a chart by dropping individual shapes and objects onto a slide, make sure to "group" the objects when you are done so that they are a single unit. The resolution of the slide projector (or conferencing software) may change the layout so the chart won't appear as you intended, which will make it useless to the audience, and hurt your credibility.

Rehearsing and General Prep

Thorough preparation will give you confidence, and will also improve your presentation in a number of small but important ways. First of all, you must rehearse your presentation to confirm you don't have too much (or too little) content for the time allotted. Adjust your slides accordingly, and make sure to allow time for Q and A (if required).

If your presentation will include a live demo, run through it and jot down the steps. It is easy to skip important points, or cover unimportant ones, if you don't have your demo planned out. If you plan to use videos in your presentation, confirm with the conference organizers that there will be an audio jack available so the audio will play through the speakers.

The flow of your presentation is important. When rehearsing, write down logical verbal transitions between slides. If you can't segue smoothly between one slide and the next, you might need to adjust the flow of the presentation. After you have jotted down your transitions, you should add them (using Microsoft PowerPoint as an example) to the "Notes" area of your slides. Print out the "Notes Pages" for offline review.

If you are speaking in another country, or to a multicultural audience, be cognizant of any idioms that may slip in when you are rehearsing, and confirm that you haven't included anything potentially offensive or confusing in your content.

Lastly, think about what questions the audience may have, and make sure you are prepared to answer them.

After you have made your final slide tweaks, create a PDF version as a backup, in case there are issues with the projector or conferencing software. Upload both versions to the cloud, or save them on a flash drive in case there is a problem with your laptop the day of the presentation. If you prefer to use a presentation remote, make sure you pack one, as well as any adapters. You can't guarantee the venue will have everything you need.

The Day of Your Presentation

Make sure to eat. Skipping a meal because you are nervous may make you lightheaded, which will interfere with your focus. Avoid drinking soda.

Wear clothes and shoes you feel comfortable in, but that are appropriate for the event. Avoid wearing anything that will be distracting and take the focus away from your message. Remove your conference badge—it can shift around and the noise can get picked up by the microphone, plus you will look more professional, as will any photos taken of you at the event.

Arrive early so you have time to set up and get a feel for the room. If the preceding speaker gets caught up chatting with the audience after their time is up and their laptop is still on the podium, politely interrupt and ask them to move it. You want to make sure you have adequate time to set up without rushing.

Open up everything you will need for your presentation, including videos, websites, and demos. Plug in the audio jack and test the volume of your videos.

Bring a watch and place it on the podium. Commit the end time of your presentation to memory. Using "Presenter View" is another way to keep track of time unobtrusively.

If a microphone is available, use it, even if you believe you have a loud speaking voice. Don't take the risk that some audience members can't hear you.

Finally, right before you start, take a deep breath. Put a smile on your face and dive in.

During Your Presentation

Avoid making too many self-deprecating comments; never say you are nervous, sick, or tired—you will put it in the audience's minds and distract them from the topic. And never say that you just finished your slides. Of course, if you have followed these tips, there is no way this would be true, but even joking about it would imply to the audience and the conference organizers that you did not prepare.

When it is time for Q and A, make sure that you don't spend too much time on one question. If a question is too detailed or specific, offer to answer it after the session or over email.

Remember: No matter what happens (blue screens, projector problems, etc.), keep talking as you work to solve the issues. The audience will appreciate your perseverance and you won't waste their time. This is where your thorough rehearsal, slide notes, and a flash drive backup can save the day.

Best of luck with your presentation! ℹ

NICKY BLEIEL is a Watson Information Developer at IBM. She has given almost 100 conference presentations and webinars, and is a past president of STC with over 20 years of experience writing and designing content for software products in a variety of industries. See nickybleiel.com *for a list of her talks, articles, and interviews.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Berkun, Scott. *Confessions of a Public Speaker*. O'Reilly Media, 2009.

Duarte, Nancy. *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* . O'Reilly Media, 2008. (Also check out her TED talk "The Secret Structure of Great Talks.")

Gallo, Carmine. *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs: How to Be Insanely Great in Front of Any Audience.* McGraw-Hill Education, 2009.