

A rapid route to better presentations

Most business talks aren't so much boring as confusing: The audience just can't grasp the message. Blame the presenter



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Present It So They Get It

By Dave Paradi
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The big problem with business presentations is not boredom but rather confusion, argues author Dave Paradi. Sure, there are times when presentations are dull, with little information transmitted.

But more often, says the Mississauga, Ont.-based presentations consultant, the audience can't pierce to the heart of the message because the information is presented so poorly.

And if you blame this problem on the pervasiveness of PowerPoint, whose slides dominate most presentations, he argues that you're wrong again.

"PowerPoint does not cause a presenter to fail to properly think through their message. PowerPoint does not cause a presenter to present volumes of data hoping that the audience will figure out the message. PowerPoint does not cause a presenter to ramble through their content with no discernible structure," he observes in *Present It So They Get It*.

The real issue isn't whether it's boredom or confusion or PowerPoint that turns so many presentations into tests of endurance. The question is how to fix it

when you're at centre stage, making a presentation to your customer, your colleagues or your boss.

Mr. Paradi suggests you can improve your performance if you adopt an approach he calls, by its acronym, RAPIDS:

Real goal

You need to know the goal of your presentation, which sounds obvious but too often is ignored. You need to know not only what you are presenting – a status update, say, or details of a new marketing approach – but also why you are presenting.

To discover your true goal, complete this sentence: "At the end of the presentation, the audience will ..." For a status update, the goal might be to assure everyone the situation is under control, or it may be to ask for agreement to move in a different direction.

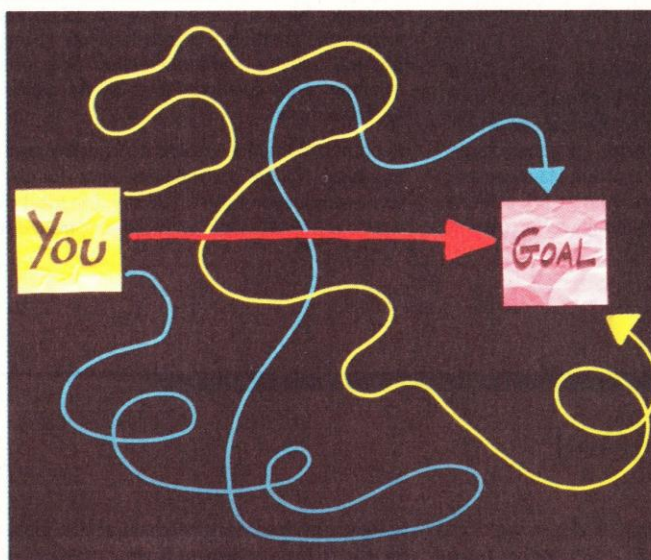
If you know your real goal, you can frame your presentation more effectively.

Audience analysis

Your audience should be your primary focus. At every step of preparation, you need to ask: How will what I am doing now help the audience understand the message better?

To do this, you need to find out as much as you can about the audience. Learn who will be attending, what their knowledge is of the topic, their attitude toward the issue, and how credible and trustworthy you appear to the audience.

Finally, consider what style or format the group prefers for pre-



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sentations. Many boards of directors, for example, expect to read some relevant materials before hearing a presentation.

Presentation outline

Just as a GPS lays out a route once it knows your starting point and destination, you need to devise a map for your talk. Start by determining the main points you will dwell on, and then what will be the main elements of each section, perhaps using sticky notes or note cards to prepare your outline.

Mr. Paradi suggests starting your presentation by sharing your conclusion: "Once they know where you are going, it is much easier for the audience to understand how the data you

are presenting substantiates the conclusion you have already stated, and they remember the key message better because it was presented first and backed up second."

Information that is focused

Speakers usually include too much information in their presentation, leading to audience confusion.

If some information takes the audience down an unnecessary route, don't use it.

Also exclude details about how the work was done; the audience really doesn't care, because they are focused on the conclusion and trust your judgment. If you have some information an audience member might

ask about, keep it in a "hidden" slide that you won't display unless the question is asked. When you present any facts, explain what they mean.

Detailed plan for each slide

Beware of information overload: Stick to one main point or idea per slide.

The top of the slide should carry a headline, much like those in a newspaper, which summarizes the takeaway message.

The body of the slide should be a visual that illustrates the point you are making.

Sufficiently prepared to present

You need to rehearse your talk, practising it out loud.

It might feel foolish, but it's the only way to be sure the presentation flows and to head off any confusing moments. You will probably need to prepare handouts.

And well before the talk, make sure the equipment is working well.

Mr. Paradi spends about half his book outlining his system and explaining how to apply it effectively. The second half is devoted to specific technical details about how best to prepare your slides.

His book is concise and clear – a winner.

Whether you are a regular or occasional speaker, it will help you improve your presentations and cut the confusion that might otherwise doom your efforts.

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