

Perfect Presentations

How You Can Master the Art of Successful Presenting

Time to Market, Andrew Ivey



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Andrew Ivey

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Perfect Presentations: How You Can Master the Art of Successful Presenting
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ISBN 978-87-7681-614-8

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About the Author

Andrew Ivey is the Principal Trainer at the presentation skills and public speaking training business, Time to Market. The training team at Time to Market runs single and two day presentation skills courses and one to one coaching sessions throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. Courses and coaching sessions are designed to bring out the public speaking talent in everyone, beginners and advanced presenters.

Before he established Time to Market nearly ten years ago as a presentation training enterprise, his work experience involved considerable worldwide public speaking at industry events in the maritime, communications and building products industries.

Introduction

No one ever said that mastering the art of presentation was easy. That's true.

Others have said good presenters are natural presenters. That's not true.

A simple aim for this short guide to mastering the art of presentation is to prove this point. Everyone can present with flair, style and success. Everyone can be effective. Yes, it requires an understanding of good presenting practice and some adherence to guidelines...although these are not rigid rules. Good presenting will come more naturally to you with time and experience. It will certainly appear effortless to the uninitiated. But, you will know better. You will know that masterful presentations are professional presentations, planned and delivered to suit your purpose, your audience's needs and their timings.

In twenty chapters this book reveals the fundamentals of good presenting practice. It highlights the major guidelines followed by successful presenters. And it offers ideas that you can follow to make your presentations more masterful. A bonus chapter, time keeping, details tips and techniques to keep you in charge of the one resource that waits for no-one...time.

Using sets of top tips and ideas, lists of things to do and examples we show you the simple things that you can do to get the most from your next presentation.

Good luck!

1. Ten Questions You Need to Ask Before Your Next Presentation

Being asked to give a public presentation is gratifying and frightening. The gratification is natural since you can assume your innate talents have been noted, your expertise acknowledged and your humility respected! How rare is that? The feeling of fright is also entirely natural—caused mainly by the uncertainty and the unknown. But you can overcome a fear of public speaking. Indeed it is typically tackled by solid preparation and planning which are the essential attributes for effective presentations.

But put aside these natural human emotions, gratification and fear because there is an immediate set of priorities for your attention.

Don't accept an invitation to give a presentation immediately. Now this might seem an unrealistic expectation when faced with the fiery South West Regional VP for Distribution but if it's the conference planner from the Distribution Association there's no problem. They will understand. And if it is the fiery VP, it's worthwhile to emphasise the professionalism with which you approach presentations at this stage. He or she will recognise that.

Your move to not accept a presentation engagement immediately is not shyness. No, you have to find out more. And finding out more at this stage is very important for your later presentation planning and preparation.

Before you accept an invitation to make a presentation you need answers to these ten questions:

1. Who wants you to speak and which organisation do they represent? There is every chance that the person asking you to present is known to you. But equally they might have contacted you through a third party or via a contact in your LinkedIn network for example. In that case it makes sense to put the contact into context and establish who they work for, whether they are independent or who they represent.
2. What are their contact details? Even if you know the person who invites you to make a presentation it's a good idea to confirm the best contact details. Check whether their cellphone has changed or whether email is preferred. And if the presentation organiser is not known to you then it is absolutely essential that you establish contact arrangements—which are, of course, reciprocal.
3. What is the planned event? It's vital to establish what event is being planned. Is it a sales conference or an annual Association meeting? Is it a meeting of technical partners or a product launch? Knowing some simple details of the event allows you to prepare. For example, if you are asked to speak at an Association's annual meeting you should establish the Association by name and its primary function. It could be a Trade Association or a charity. Knowing these details allows you to picture your potential audience and your likely participation.

4. When and where is the planned event? Distance is not dead. Knowing when and where the event is due to occur must be identified right away. If the event is local that might make it easier to participate. Alternatively if the event involves significant travel it might be possible to combine your participation with some other activity. Some knowledge of when the event is planned for will also provide some clues. If the event is next week then you can be assured that more than one speaker has dropped out and you are being asked out of necessity. It does happen, unfortunately. Typically presentation planners work to timescales of several months when planning key events.
5. How many speakers will be involved? It's a rarity for any speaker to be the sole presenter on the podium. In most instances you will share the platform with several speakers with a budgeted time allowance of some 30 minutes. Perhaps longer. Knowing how many speakers are involved gives you an indication of the event's importance, its profile within its industry and its potential attendance. And as a tip, once you have established how many speakers are involved you have the means to explore their details at a later time.
6. What is the theme of the event? It's not unusual for event planners to use a theme with which to identify their event. Using a theme such as, *Being Best*, allows a range of speakers to explore all the essential attributes of customer care, quality management, production quality or people management. It provides a framework for each speaker and importantly, allows each speaker to interact sub-consciously with the rest of the platform. Knowing the theme at this stage is essential for your preparation. And if there is no clear theme you should aim to get this on the presentation planner's agenda later.
7. What sort of presentation is expected from you? This might be a purely mechanical question, but you have to ask it. For instance there might be an expectation that you will make a presentation and then answer questions later. Or, you might be expected to sit on a speaker panel, make a presentation in turn and then have questions asked collectively of the panel later. Different formats require different preparation and you should understand the event requirements early on.
8. Why are you being asked to present? You should take care with this question. If the event is planned for next week you might already suspect the answer! But there is a serious point to be made. If you are being asked to present because you are a respected expert in your field then it's very likely that your presentation subject is going to be crafted along the same lines. Alternatively, if you are asked to present because of your work in a particular organisation then it's natural to consider citing relevant organisation case studies and references when you move on with presentation planning.

9. What visual elements can be supported and will the event be broadcast? You take it for granted that every event supports multimedia content. But if you are asked to speak before or after lunch then the visual dimension of your talk will be very different to a standard podium presentation. You must pick up this point later with the event planner. It's not unusual for the media to be involved with larger scale events. Knowledge about media involvement at this stage is important since a late surprise might prove a problem. If the media is to be involved then you should ensure that your marketing or PR team is aware of their involvement which could be mutually productive.
10. Can I call you back to confirm? This is not as hard as it sounds. You will need to check your schedule. Or you might need to check with your partner. Alternatively you might want to see whether anything else in the schedule is moveable to accommodate this event. On the basis of the answers that you have already received this invitation might be a case of..."drop everything and attend," or an instance of..."try to squeeze it in if possible." Once you have agreed a timeline in which to call back the planner you must call them back. It's sensible. You will need their active support and involvement later.

So you have ten easy questions to ask before you agree to give that presentation. In essence they are the first steps you need to take to master that presentation. By asking them you acquire much of the useful information that will subsequently guide your presentation planning process. And by planning effectively you ensure that you present effectively without a fear of public speaking. Now, should you accept that invitation or not?

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2. Understand Your Audience's Sacrifice

Show me a conference auditorium and I will show you a presenter mouthing their misfortune at presenting to their audience. Ingratitude aside, they should consider their audience's experience. Their presentation audience has to undergo an entirely unnatural experience—and many of them might prefer to be somewhere else!

Natural conversationalists are everywhere. And your audience is definitely made up of talkers. You only have to listen to them before the speakers start to realise that. Yes, there are some of us who are better at the art of conversation than others. Some are more talkative and some are more reticent. But apart from these small differences you are united in your understanding of the rules of the conversation. These are:

- Conversations are held in small groups—probably no more than 6 people.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Interruptions are rude.
- Pauses are very, very short—or non-existent.
- Long pauses can be rude. If there is a slight pause then someone else takes their turn at speaking.
- "Umms" and "Errs" indicate that you want to keep your turn—you are just thinking about your next word.
- If you repeat something your fellow conversationalists worry about your well being!

In the main, these are the simple rules of conversation. And you all understand them. Everyone takes their turn before passing on the baton of conversation. Conversational bores are people who either do not know these rules or will not abide by them. The classic bore is someone who always interrupts or never passes on the conversation.

But when you sit in an audience and listen to a presentation these rules don't count. It is not a conversational bore who is holding forth—it's you, the presenter. Natural rules of speaker engagement are suspended for the duration of the presentation. Instead your audience has to follow a separate set of contrary rules. The rules of presentation:

- Presentations are made to large groups—often total strangers.
- Only one person speaks at a time—for quite a long time.
- Interruptions might be signaled—but most audiences don't interrupt.

- Short pauses, medium pauses and lengthy pauses are standard practice—they don't signal it is someone else's turn to speak.
- "Umms" and "Errs" still indicate that the speaker is going to keep going regardless.
- Repetition is standard practice—you expect it as an audience.

The standard rules of conversation are suspended in your presentation. New rules apply and your audience knows them.

But your audience also has to put up with a whole set of unnatural physical expectations. These are:

- Sit still for upwards of 30 minutes—and sometimes longer.
- Keep quiet for upwards of 30 minutes—unless asked to say or do something...by you.
- Sit in the dark as a speaker clicks through their series of PowerPoint™ slides. The human race is engineered to either sleep or party when the lights go down—turning down the lights signals something in the brain and attention spans decrease.
- Be attentive, focused and listen for a long period of time—this is very hard work. Most speakers should try listening now and again. It takes considerable effort.

The very least that you, as a speaker, can do is acknowledge your audience's predicament. Instead of becoming uptight with speaker nerves, your concerns should be for your audience. It is they who are clearly the most uncomfortable in any presentation.

Your aim as a speaker must be to minimise their discomfort. Your presentations must be clearly structured, signposted and themed for a listening audience. You should cut down on the ever present information overload of a PowerPoint™ slide deck. You should build engagement and participation with strong and focused eye contact, rhetorical techniques and reasoned argument. You should use your voice, signaling with tone and volume. You should aim for simplicity of sentence structure, composition and length. The shorter the better.

Audiences become best involved through their applause, their laughter and their response to a call for action—even a call for a show of hands can be welcome.

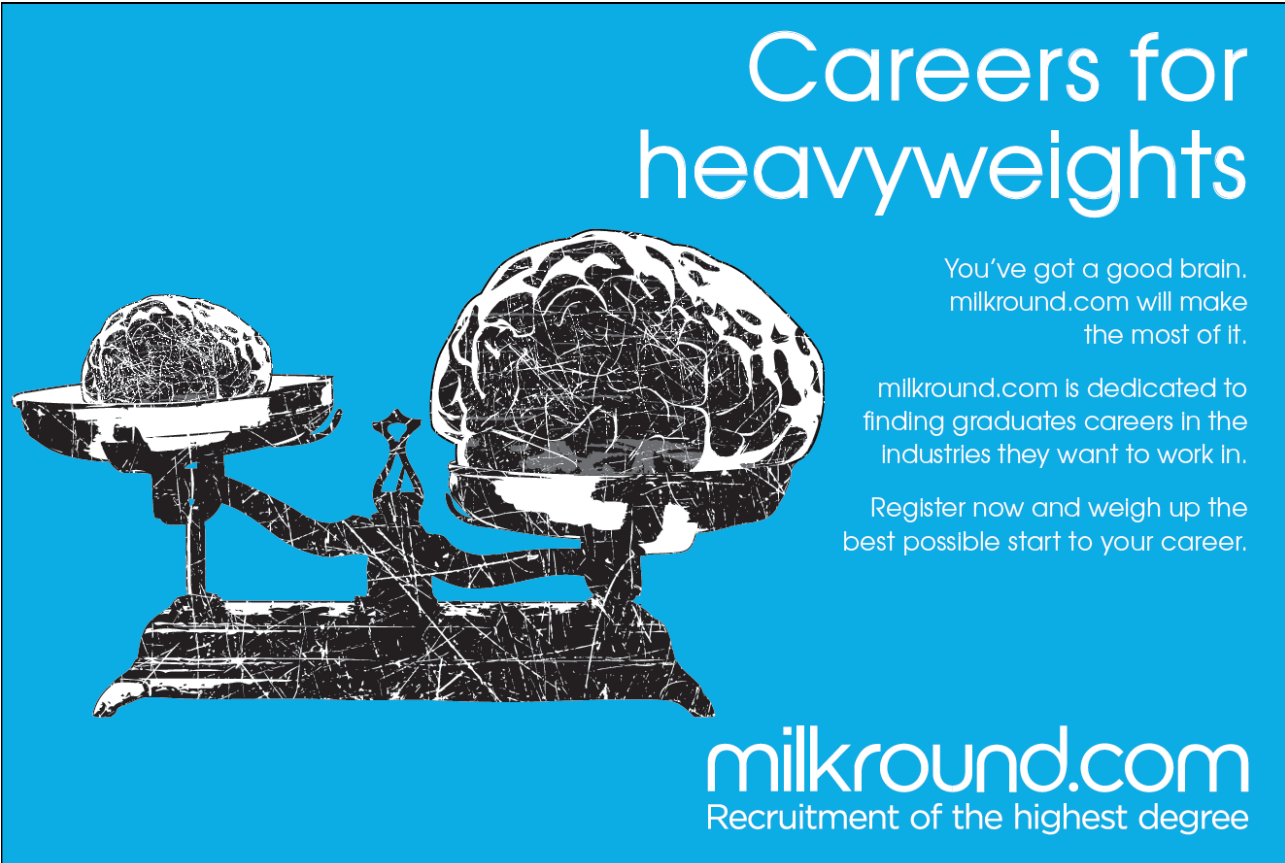
So, instead of concentrating on your own speaker nerves, a better strategy is to consider the very needs of your audience. It is they who are in the most unnatural position. It is they who have made the biggest sacrifice. It is they who have suspended their rules of speaker engagement. The least you can do is acknowledge their effort, present clearly, be structured and seek their engagement. The simple things are best for confident public speaking.

3. Master an Attentive Audience

As a speaker it might seem remarkable that some of your audience don't listen to you. But it's not remarkable. It's true. And there are good reasons for an audience being inattentive. Many of the reasons are down to you—and there are five things that you must do about it.

1. Information overload. It's a fact that you give too much information in a speech or presentation. You use extensive bullet points or lists such as these! You often have copious PowerPoint™ slides. You use too much text on your slides. In all cases the listening powers of your audience are being dealt a disservice. Less information is more.
2. Audience preoccupation. An audience's travails at home, in the office or on the sports field can leave them underwhelmed when it comes to your speech. As a speaker you have the duty to know, or at least understand, your audience. If industry redundancies are in the news when you speak to the Manufacturing Association their thoughts will be elsewhere. If the big match was last night or tonight then you'd better be prepared.

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3. Think ahead. When you speak at the rate of some 150 words per minute your audience might well be thinking ahead at the rate of 600 or 700 words a minute. They might be pursuing a tangent that you left a moment ago. Or they might be puzzling over something that's not quite clear. In all these instances your duty as a speaker is to be alert to their situation. You need to build structure and organisation in your speech. You must use a good outline and make distinct recognizable points. You must use repetition to emphasise these points. And you must be alert to audience reaction as you speak. If the eyes glaze over, then there's something wrong with your presentation.
4. Noise. Not all your public speaking will be in a rarefied auditorium with pitch perfect acoustics. Afraid not. For most of us will become familiar with speaking in a noisy conference room, a seminar in the basement or next to the hotel kitchen. And to exacerbate the environment, you should also note that a good proportion of your audience is likely to have some form of hearing impairment—that's the way it is. You have to accommodate it. Prior preparation will help. You can ensure that your audience is as physically close as they can be. You can ensure that the seating is raked towards you and you can ensure that the catering team brings out the coffee trolleys once you have finished. Beyond that—speak up, tone up and emphasise the key points.
5. Audience exhaustion. You should be alert to the audience's physical tiredness. Their active listening to a day or two of conference speeches is exhausting. If you are less fortunate to be speaking at the end of an event you need to be prepared: be ready with some participative exercises, change the pace or use more multimedia.

Tackling the five challenges of a non-listening audience is not hard work. You need to project enthusiasm and interest in your topic. You have to appear animated and fired-up—even if it is the final day of a 3-day conference. Your speech should present clear tangible benefits to your audience—providing good reason for their attention. And you have to structure your speech to meet their attention needs. It should begin on a solid footing, have a recognisable middle and end on a high note. By keeping the speech simple and uncluttered you ensure that the barriers to listening are easily overcome.

4. Master Your Presentation Mission

How familiar is this scenario? Do you typically click on the PowerPoint™ icon immediately you are tasked with preparing a presentation? If that is the case then you definitely have common cause with most of us. And regrettably it is a big mistake. It's a mistake because your presentation focus is already upon the mechanics of slides, decks, visuals, clip-art, logos and templates. Such a focus will be needed –but much later. For now your focus has to be on your expected achievement and outcome.

Before you click on the PowerPoint™ icon you should draft in a single sentence the planned achievement of your presentation. In today's business language you would recognise this as a mission statement. But unlike many vacuous mission statements the purpose of this one is to capture the planned impact of your presentation upon your audience. That is, how do you plan for your audience to respond? You should consider the following questions at this stage:

- After my presentation what will the audience do that is different?
- After the presentation what will they know that is different?
- Once they have heard the presentation what will they believe that is different?

Before you begin to physically lay the foundations of an effective presentation, let alone build its structure or prepare the PowerPoint™ slides you must have a firm grasp on the expected outcome of the presentation—what it is that you are aiming to do. To be effective your presentation will have an impact upon your audience beyond that of a management report, an email or a document. Your direct face-to-face presentation aims to change the actual behaviour, thoughts and beliefs of your audience. That is why you do it.

If your successful presentation has to impact your audience in a way that simply reading its content would not achieve then your mission statement has to capture these planned expectations. An example might be:

"Ensure that the team understands the HR (Human Resources) impact of factory closure."

What can you say about this? It meets the requirement for a single sentence. It is succinct and to the point. It is measurable—you should be able to gauge the team's understanding of the HR consequences quite readily. It also sounds achievable within the context of a single presentation. And that should not be overlooked. You can not expect too much from only one presentation!

With the mission statement prepared, what is next? Park the mission statement for an hour. Then try to recall it from memory. If you can do so readily then you have got something that is fully workable and from which you can hang the working objectives of a quality and effective presentation. If you can't recall it after one hour, then it won't work. Aim to re-draft.

5. Master Your Presentation Objectives

With your mission completed your next step is to build strong workable objectives. The emphasis is definitely on the word, workable. All your objectives have to be achievable by you, the speaker. And they have to be achieved in the time permitted with the audience's involvement. Once you factor in the external pressures of time and audience it is imperative that you have the means to deliver—workable objectives give you the means.

Having good workable objectives is, therefore, an essential element of the effective presentation. Critically they fulfill 3 main purposes:

1. Workable objectives provide you with a framework for success—giving you a quick embodiment of everything that you need to present.
2. Workable objectives stop you from rambling and going off message—either when you plan, when you write or when you deliver your presentation.
3. Workable objectives get you to where you want to be getting—serving as visible milestones of progress made and distance still to be covered.

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But that is not all they do. Workable objectives have another overriding purpose in your presentation. Well outlined and understood objectives assist your audience to understand your presentation's logic. They ensure that your audience is more likely to follow the presentation and remain captivated by the subject—whatever that subject might be. And that has to be the overriding reason why you invest time and effort in getting the right objectives.

The mission statement in the previous chapter was:

"Ensure that the team understands the HR (Human Resources) consequences of factory closure."

It was a dry old subject, but typical of many presentation missions made every day in the work-place. With this mission statement you could expect some workable objectives along the lines of:

Set the scene for manufacturing optimisation.
Establish the productivity benchmarks for manufacturing progress.
Assess the options available and their impacts.
Describe and cost the HR (Human Resources) consequences.
Detail the preferred route for factory closure.

Your target should be some four or five workable objectives that can be handled easily and smoothly in a business presentation. Any more objectives than this, however, and you run the risk of exhausting your audience. It is a mistake that is most often found with the PowerPoint™ presentation style—where you are presented with multiple lists of objectives and issues at every stage. Too much detail at this early stage is not useful.

Your workable objectives should be short, sharp and to the point.

They should stress action and focus on activity. Your choice of words is important, for they also convey important meaning for the audience. You need to use action words. Set the scene, establish, assess, describe and detail.

In a marketing presentation your workable objectives might include: research, develop, deliver, compete or gain share—action words which are well understood by your audience work best. There is no room for misunderstanding.

Finally, once you have committed to your workable objectives, consider how they fit with your mission statement. Ensure that the two are in tandem and assist one another. Bear in mind how they impact upon an audience's understanding and appreciation of your presentation. Once you have set your workable objectives, your next step is to master the detail of your presentation.

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