Adrian Reed: Delivering a Persuasive Presentation in the Real World

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Introduction

As Business Analysts and Change Practitioners, it's essential that we are able to communicate clearly with our stakeholders.

Giving a presentation is an opportunity to communicate and bond with an audience, while also conveying information and knowledge in a compelling way.

Within the corporate world, the unfortunate truth is that presentations are often overused and the quality is incredibly poor. I'm sure we've all sat in meetings where our attention has waned, and where other attendees are looking at their watches or staring out of the window. Perhaps we've kept attention until slide 27, but when it comes to slide 54 we've really drifted off.

Presenting well can build rapport and increase credibility, and it is the sad truth that a poor presentation can have an equally negative affect. By focussing on good quality presentations we can increase the likelihood that our audience will be engaged and will focus on the content that we provide them.

In this paper we discuss five practical steps that will help us to create presentations that connect and engage.

Step 1: Message and Objectives

Step 2: Audience Analysis

Step 3: Prepare Interesting Content

Step 4: Deliver Persuasively

Step 5: Creatively Challenge the Norm. Present Something Different!

Five Steps to Better Presentations

Step 1: Understand the Message and Objectives

The first part of planning any type of communication is to think about what the message should be.

This thought process should happen before you decide on the medium and format of the communication. It has often been cited that humans have a limited capacity for holding and retaining information in short term memory, and there can be significant benefits in ensuring you stick to three or four main points.

Of course, you can cover much more ground than this – but by linking back to your three or four main points, you will be ensuring that the audience has a fighting chance of remembering the points that you want them to.

It is also worth establishing or deciding the purpose or objective of the presentation. For some presentations, you might not want the audience to remember anything in particular – but you might want them to *do* something as a result (e.g. sign off a document). It is worth crystallising and writing down this objective, so that you can ensure you include a 'call to action' during the session.

Example 1: Memorable Themes

A number of years ago, I saw Alan Chambers (the polar explorer) speak. His presentation was wide ranging, covering a huge amount of ground, but I can still remember three key themes:

- Drop the weight
- Pick up the Pace
- Deliver

How many of our day-to-day presentations will stick in our audiences' minds months or years after the event?

To determine the areas you should focus on, it can be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

What three or four things do I want my stakeholders to remember in six months time?

What would make this presentation a success?

Personally, I find it useful to write these things down on a post-it note or index card, and keep these visual when I am planning and preparing my presentation.

Step 2: Audience Analysis

2.1 Do You Need a Presentation at All?

Once you have decided on the objective and key messages that you are trying to portray with your presentation, the next step is to consider your audience. One significant, and often overlooked question is do you need to give a presentation at all?

Whether a presentation is the most appropriate medium will depend on the subject matter, as well as the needs and preferences of your audience. For highly technical or unique material, or for material where you need interaction, then a presentation can be a fantastic and effective use of resources. However, less unique material might be better conveyed through phone calls or e-mails. If you can express everything you need to present in a succinct written document, then this can be an alternative – however, the challenge is ensuring everyone reads it!

2.2 Know your Audience

Assuming you have decided that a presentation is the most effective way of communicating your key messages, the next step is to truly understand your audience. Often, authors start by immediately opening their presentation software, and creating a slide deck. Resist this temptation!

Start by thinking about your audience's preferences, including:

- What they will want to gain from attending and hearing you present
- Their current understanding level of the subject matter you are presenting
- Their background/world view
- Whether they are likely to be supportive of your message
- Whether they prefer information to be presented in a formal/informal manner
- What their level of interest is likely to be (e.g. are you going to have to convince 'sell' during the presentation?)

It is unlikely that you'll be able to determine all of this information in advance, but the more information you have the stronger position you'll be in when you come to prepare your presentation material.

Step 3: Prepare Interesting Content

In this context, I am using the word 'content' to mean anything which forms part of your presentation. This could include your speech, your slides or any other supporting material that you decide to use.

3.1 Create a Structure

Keeping your key messages and objective in mind, think about how you will structure your presentation. It can be incredibly useful to list down the topics and sub-topics that you will cover in your presentation, and in which order. Undoubtedly these things will evolve as you put your presentation together, but it is useful to have a starting point to work from.

Resist the temptation to jump straight into your presentation software at this point! It can be extremely valuable to plan your presentation on paper first (and then decide if you even need slides).

Near the beginning, it is useful to briefly outline the objectives/purpose of your presentation. After this, it is essential to structure the presentation logically, so that you convey your message in a clear and consistent way. Think about your audience, and think about the best structure for them – where should you start? Which points should you cover first? And in which order?

Having a clear and logical structure is also advantageous as it will help you to remember your presentation, and can act as a 'prompt' if you dry-up or lose your place when presenting.

Example 2: Team Presentation

This fictional example demonstrates how the techniques discussed so far can be used. Let's assume we are giving a presentation to a team of BAs, providing an overview of the XYZ Project, which will deliver a new time-logging system that they will need to use.

Objective: To demonstrate the XYZ website prototype, and gain buy-in from the team

Key messages:

1. **Save time:** The new website will be slick, and easier to use than the current system
2. **Date:** Launch is 01/01/2011
3. **Weekly**: On the new system, time sheets must be completed weekly

Audience: Peers, BAs. Mixture of backgrounds. Good knowledge of existing timesheet system, some likely to be sceptical of new system as the existing system is very difficult to use. Very visual thinkers, adept with models and diagrams.

High Level Structure:

- Introduction & Objectives of presentation
- Why we need a new time logging system
- Demo of prototype
- Explanation of advantages (will be quicker!)
- Launch schedule
- When the audience needs to start logging time
- Demo of time logging
- Time logging frequency
- Summary
- Close & Questions

3.2 Supporting Material

You will almost certainly be familiar with at least one presentation software package.

Presentation software and slide-decks are used extensively in many corporate organisations. The danger can be that the software becomes a default choice, and presenters don't think about the appropriateness of this. In some cases, it becomes the norm for a presentation to become a series of bullet points, which are systematically exposed by the presenter. If everything you are going to say is on the slides, then you probably don't need to be presenting it. There are likely to be alternative ways of imparting the information.

Some of the most interesting and persuasive presenters don't use slides at all. If you do decide to use supporting material, consider both the type of supporting material to use, as well as the content. The main thing to consider here is what will be useful to help my audience understand my points. For example, are they adept at reading charts and graphs? If so, this can be an extremely powerful way of conveying complex information. The type of information you are conveying may also have an impact on the types of appropriate supporting material.

There are many creative ways of using supporting material, other than slides, including:

- Objects or props
- Posters/flip-charts
- Music
- Recorded sound (e.g. speeches)
- Video
- Rich pictures
- Photographs
- Board-games
- Etc, etc – the only limit is your imagination!

It is worth considering different and innovative types of supporting material, as these are likely to get the audience's attention and make them remember your presentation. People expect a slide show (as these form the basis of the vast majority of corporate presentations), so when they are presented with something different they take note. Brainstorming with a colleague can be a great way to come up with different and innovative ideas.

Example 3: Diagram Rather than Slides

A team of BAs wanted to convey a very complex message to some executive stakeholders. Rather than use a deck of slides, they decided to use a role-play, some case studies, and a single 'tube map' slide which consolidated the information.

This approach was commended by those that were involved.

If you do decide to use presentation software, think long and hard about whether you should use your corporate template. Many corporate templates are based around a strong brand identity, including colours and fonts. The trouble is that colours and typefaces that work on glossy brochures don't always work when being projected!

If your presentation is internal, then do you really need to use a corporate template? By using a blank presentation template, you will have more space on each slide to convey your message. This could mean more images, or larger and more legible diagrams. Using a blank template might seem unconventional, but you're highly unlikely to get fired for it…. And your presentation is likely to be far more memorable. Of course, for external presentations, you may need to ensure the correct branding is used.

Step 4: Deliver Persuasively

4.1 Practice Makes Perfect

Once you have prepared your presentation, the next logical (and sometimes nerve-racking step) is to actually deliver it. To ensure a smooth and professional execution, the best advice is to have several dress-rehearsals before you actually present. When practicing a new presentation, you may find that you re-order your points, or add or remove material. You will be more confident as a result, and are likely to be more comfortable and confident when you present for real.

Some people advocate practicing only for big, important presentations. My personal belief is that if I am going to ask people to sit through a presentation, then I owe it to them to make sure it is an interesting, relevant and polished as possible! Clearly the amount of time spent practicing will depend on the presentation. Some authors advocate mental rehearsal (i.e. imagining the presentation, rather than practicing it for real). This technique can be useful if you are pushed for time.

4.2 Reinforce and Don't Distract

It is important to reinforce your main points and objectives during the presentation, and avoid doing anything that might distract your audience. It is also worth considering stylistic attributes such as:

- **Vocal tone:** Consider varying it when appropriate. Avoid monotone.
- **Volume:** Ensure people can hear you, but don't shout!
- **Gesticulation:** The right amount
- **Movement and posture:** Too much movement can be distracting, but it depends on the size of the audience.
- **Co-presenter:** For longer presentations, consider having a partner to help. This will reduce the load on you, and will also help keep the presentation 'fresh' and will help to keep the audience's attention.
- **Eye contact:** Important to get the right amount, and to 'share' it rather than focussing on one area of the audience.
- **Rapport with audience:** Deliver well, smile and be warm.

These are all complex subjects on their own, and I will refrain from discussing them in detail in this article! However, consider how you will use each attribute whilst you are speaking.

Step 5: Creatively Challenge the Norm

A common thread which sits across all of these steps is to be creative – this is an intrinsic part of steps 1–4. Too many corporate presentations look like they've come off a production line, with speakers uncovering bullet point after tedious bullet point.

Audiences appreciate speakers that take risks and try new techniques. Considering what creative content you can include, as well as creative ways to use supporting material. Your audience will thank you for it!

Conclusion

The main thing to remember when planning a presentation is your audience. Ensure that you know what message you are trying to impart, and make it relevant for them. Consider your content and supporting material, and where possible take time to rehearse.

A handy visual summary of this article is shown below:

Presentation

Step 1: Message and Objectives

- Stick to three or four main points
- Define the objective

Step 2: Audience Analysis

- Do you need a presentation at all?
- What is their world view?
- Will they support your ideas?
- What type of supporting material will work for them?

Step 3: Prepare Interesting Content

Structure

- Objectives
- Structure should be logical and clear
- What will work for the audience

Choose Appropriate Supporting Material

- Slides
- Objects/props
- Posters/flip charts
- Music
- Video
- Recorded sound (e.g. interviews)
- Rich pictures
- Photographs
- Board games

Step 4: Deliver Persuasively

Rehearsal

- Dress rehearsal
- Mental rehearsal

Reinforce and Don't Distract

- Vocal tone
- Volume
- Gesticulation
- Movement and posture
- Eye contact
- Rapport with audience

Step 5: Creatively Challenge the Norm

- Avoid corporate standards unless necessary
- Try new techniques
- Avoid tired techniques

About the Author

Adrian Reed is a true advocate of strategic business analysis and innovation. In his day job, he acts as Principal Consultant and Director at Blackmetric Business Solutions where he provides Business Analysis consultancy and training solutions to a range of clients in varying industries. Adrian is a past President of the UK Chapter of the IIBA and he speaks internationally on topics relating to strategy, problem solving, analysis and business change.

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