

English Corner

How to make an impressive presentation



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This issue examines presentation skills, a significant requirement in the workplace. We focus on general presentation skills and ways to make your introduction impressive.

(I) What makes winning presentations?

According to Evans (2010), 43% of the professionals in Hong Kong use English for making presentations in the workplace (56% using Chinese and the rest Putonghua). Evans (2010) divided presentation skills into three categories: preparation, organizing and delivering. The following are the sub-skills in each category.

Preparation:

- Understanding the needs of the audience
- Planning a presentation

Organizing:

- Introducing a presentation
- Developing ideas in the body of a presentation
- Making smooth transitions from point to point
- Organizing information/ideas logically
- Concluding a presentation

Delivering:

- Presenting data in charts/tables
- Handling the audience's questions
- Putting your ideas/thoughts into speech
- Speaking clearly: pronunciation
- Speaking in a natural spoken style
- Using appropriate stress and intonation
- Maintaining eye contact
- Using visual aids effectively
- Presenting with the help of notes/prompts
- Using appropriate body language
- Speaking at the right speed



- Getting the timing right
- Engaging the interest of the audience

Some of the above skills are concerned with the speech itself (e.g. content, organization and language use) while many others are about the presenter, for example, how the presenter speaks and uses verbal and non-verbal language effectively.

Among the different presentation skills outlined above, Evans (2010) reported that professionals find the following skills the most difficult (in order of difficulty): engaging the interest of the audience; handling the audience's questions; and speaking in a natural spoken style. The top three easiest skills reported are presenting data in charts/tables; using visual aids effectively; and presenting with the help of notes/prompts.

(II) How to make the introduction impressive

Having an impressive and powerful introduction to a presentation can hook the audience in the first few seconds and determine its success. There are three ways to make the introduction appealing: appealing to self-interest; making the audience think; and giving them a jolt (Bowden 1998).

1. Appealing to self-interest:

- Initial/benefit/promise (IBP)
- Maslow's hierarchy of needs
- Only three points

The IBP is a classic technique for hooking the audience. We simply have to tell the audience what the presentation can bring to them. For example:

- "In the next ten minutes you're going to learn three easy, surefire ways to make winning presentations."
- "Winning presentations! Easy, surefire ways!"
- "Would you like to add more quality years to your life? Think twice before....I'm Mable Chan and I'm going to share with you three secrets that can add those years to your life."

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which was proposed in 1943, is a psychology theory concerning the different levels of motivation for human beings, ranging from the most basic to the most complicated. People's basic needs must be satisfied before pursuing other needs higher in the hierarchy. According to the hierarchy, there are four main levels of needs:

- Security needs level: the need for shelter and job security
- Social needs level: the need to belong, to be with others and to be accepted by them
- Esteem/ego needs level: the need for respect from others
- Self-actualization needs level: the need to realize potential

Applying this to presentations, we have to understand the needs of the audience and address these in the introduction. For example:

- “You are looking for a purpose to your commitment. So are we. You want to safeguard the future. So do we.” (addressing audience’s security needs)
- “It’s a great feeling being part of the awarding team, isn’t it?” (addressing social needs)
- “Today I am proud to announce the result of our *Teacher of the Year Competition*.” (addressing esteem/ego needs)

An audience will be glad that the speaker starts by indicating that the speech will contain no more than three important points. This can help engage the audience’s interest.

For example:

- “There are just three things that count in life: health, happiness and hope.”
- “There are only three things to bear in mind when writing a business proposal. One:.....Two.....Three.....”

2. Making the audience think:

- Excite, link, involve (ELI)
- Story or quotation
- Question or riddle

ELI is an extension of the *Only three points* method. The following was given by an African delegate at an international conference on Third World Aid (Bowden 1998: 61).

- “My mother-in-law does not like me because my father ate her father.” (*Excite. Shocked silence followed by riotous laughter.*)
- “You laughed just now when I said my father ate another man. Well, it’s true, he did.” (*Link*)
- “You all come from countries which have centuries of civilization and culture behind you. Yet – you will forgive me – you are all still making economic and political mistakes. My country is one generation removed from cannibalism. Is it surprising.....ladies and gentlemen- we need your help.” (*Involve*)

The purpose of the speaker is to ask the participants to offer help (i.e. we need your help) through exciting, linking and finally involving them.

A question can evoke memories and help create common ground for communication.

For example:

- “Do you remember what happened in Hong Kong in 2003? That was the year of SARS, a year forever etched in our collective memory.” (The talk is probably about the importance of an effective medical system.)
- “Does training matter? Is it not essential to have a highly skilled workforce? Should we not spend a few minutes thinking about this?” (These are rhetorical questions to emphasize the importance of staff training.)

3. Giving them a jolt:

- Shocking image
- Striking fact
- Controversial statement

Surprising the participants is another way to seek attention. For example, we can outline some striking facts to arouse their fear, urging the audience to pay attention to the speech (Bowden 1998: 65):

- “Research shows that if we give a customer cause to complain, they are likely to tell ten other people. If we please them they will only tell one. Not a ratio to forget.”
- “Producing a good product is no longer enough. Today people expect/deserve excellent customer care....Believe me, it’s far harder to get new customers than to take good care of the existing ones. Yet even so, we have lost six out of every ten customers who were on our books five years ago....”

A controversial statement can whet the appetite of the audience. Whether they agree with it or not, they must pay attention to the speech and try to find out more. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright used this technique effectively when speaking in Pittsburg (Bowden 1998: 66).

- “This is the ugliest city I’ve ever seen.”

Quiz:

Imagine that you are going to make a presentation on the education system in Hong Kong. Use the *Excite, link and involve (ELI)* approach, *Shocking image* and *Controversial statement* to make the introductions appealing.

Answer:

1. Excite, Link and Involve (ELI)

- “My six-year-old brother committed suicide after he was scolded by his class teacher.” (*Excite. Shocked silence followed by riotous laughter.*)
- “Why did you laugh when I told you my little brother committed suicide? It’s true, he did.” (*Link*)
- “You all come from Britain where competition is not as keen as that in the Hong Kong education system. You might not have as much pressure as students in Hong Kong, even primary students at the tender ages of six to seven. In Hong Kong, ..” (*Involve*)

2. Shocking image

“Just picture it....students and their parents in Hong Kong. Students and parents in Hong Kong are hardworking, and they work day and night, doing assignments and preparing for quizzes and examinations; yes, both students and parents.....Now, picture having such a life for about 18 years before getting into college.”

3. Controversial statement

“British students are much lazier than Hong Kong students.”

“British students are not as skillful as Hong Kong students in coping with examinations.”



References

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