

Free Thinking: Purposeful Presentations

Got a presentation looming? Don't even think about it before you've read Martin Shovel's advice...

The road to lacklustre presentations and speeches is paved with good intentions. It often begins with a positive desire to stop navel-gazing and get stuck into the business of getting the job done, or it may simply be a response to the pressure of time.

But unfortunately, the impulse to dive straight into your material and start writing masks a serious confusion between purpose and content that inevitably results in presentations that lack focus, clarity and impact, and leave an audience gasping for air.

Purpose is the guiding light that illuminates a path through the dark and tangled forest of content – it enables us to select, arrange and shape our material meaningfully. Preparation for a presentation or speech should always begin with a clearly articulated statement of purpose. Once articulated, your purpose will make it much easier for you to assemble and edit your material quickly and effectively.

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Martin Shovel, co-director, CreativityWorks

Asking the right questions There are two fundamental questions whose answers can help us define the purpose of a presentation. The first of these is perhaps obvious, but often overlooked, it is: Why am I giving this presentation at all? If you can't come up with a compelling answer to this most fundamental of questions, maybe you should think again.

If, for example, your purpose is to get across a large amount of information, you'll soon discover that a spoken presentation is likely to be the wrong choice. Even if your audience is keen and the information useful and fascinating, there is a psychological limit to the amount of detail that people can absorb and process during a live encounter.

In a situation like this a better choice might be to send round the information in the form of a document. Of course, getting people to read it will be more difficult, so perhaps you could highlight the key points (a maximum of three) in a short presentation to whet their appetite – hopefully this will encourage them to go away and read the whole thing afterwards.

Looking for results The second question you should ask yourself is: What do I want to happen as a result of my presentation? The answer to

this question covers a broad range of possibilities. For example, if you're in a leadership role, it might be about making a personal and positive impact on your audience.

With a sales presentation, your desired outcome will probably be to make a sale. But in some cases you'll be hoping to raise the profile of a particular product or service, or to build relationships that could lead to sales further down the line. It's important to clarify exactly what result you're looking for before you start, so that you can focus on creating a presentation that will achieve your goals.

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Or you may be trying to explain a complex product or service to an audience that doesn't share your level of technical expertise. In this case your purpose will be to ensure that your listeners understand what you're talking about in terms that make sense to them.

You pays your money... Writing a presentation or speech without first deciding on your purpose is a bit like going to the supermarket without a shopping list. Chances are you'll waste a lot of time and energy flitting from aisle to aisle like a bewildered bumble-bee in search of honey. Reacting on impulse, you'll end up buying a shed-load of things you don't need and, when you get home and start unpacking, you'll be shocked to discover just how many essentials you've forgotten to buy.

So, before you dive headlong into your next presentation, take a few moments to consider your fundamental purpose in giving it. Doing this will help light your way through the whole process of planning and writing it, and will guarantee that you get the results you're after.