

PUTTING ON A GOOD SHOW

Giving presentations is part and parcel of a manager's job these days but it remains a skill that few take the trouble to really learn.

Brian Salter, the author of the new *Instant Manager* book on *Effective Presenting**, talks to **Sue Mann** about the importance of good presentation skills to career development

How do you define effective presenting?

I suppose the real test of whether you are effective or not is if you succeed in getting your message across, whatever that particular message is. Presenting is one of those catch-all phrases that can mean so many different things to different people. But at the end of the day the basic point is to 'sell' an idea – whether that is as a sales pitch, at a staff gathering, at a conference or whatever.

There are many parallels with broadcasting in that primarily by the use of your voice you have to hold the attention of an audience and communicate certain key messages in such a way that they will go away remembering what it was you are trying to communicate and, hopefully, feel an empathy with what you are saying.

Where did you learn your presenting skills?

I worked for many years in the BBC in both radio and TV both as a producer and a presenter. I also worked as a news anchor and current affairs presenter on Saudi Arabian TV. In addition I spent many years working in the PR industry where staging news conferences and attempting to change mindsets was the name of the game. So I have approached the concept of presentation from a variety of different angles.

When did you first become interested in the mechanics of it, what works and what doesn't?

In many ways, the parallels with broadcasting are obvious. To be an effective broadcaster often uses the same techniques as a regular conference presenter. When I look back at some of the awful programmes I made at the start of my career I am well able to appreciate many of the problems that people who are not used to presenting have to face up to.

In my training courses I spend time analysing what makes a presentation effective and what are the golden rules of what NOT to do!

What do people fear the most about giving presentations and why?

Very often it boils down to a lack of confidence. Why should people be interested in what I have to say? What if I don't live up to their expectations? And then the fear of nerves taking over often results in a self-fulfilling prophesy.

What if my mouth turns dry? What will people think of me? And so on. The good news is that there are certain techniques that can get even the most stage-frightened presenter out of this state, which is as common as there are presenters. In fact, I would think that the vast majority of presenters go through exactly the same feelings of dread and fear at some stage in their presenting 'careers'.

Why are good presentation skills so essential?

If the whole point of giving a presentation is to impart information or to sell an idea, then there is little point in giving a bad presentation and thereby 'losing your audience' so that your key messages are not taken on board. Almost everyone at some point in their lives needs to sell an idea, or apply for a job or stand up and address other people. And as the act of presenting – for most people – gets easier the more they do it, it makes sense to learn these techniques from an early age.

What do people need to be aware of to avoid giving uninspiring presentations?

Monotonous presentations can result from a variety of causes. Obviously the way you use your voice has a great impact on the way people will listen to you. Body language, too, gives away a lot about how you are feeling



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and, by extension, how credible as an authority you are.

But one of the most damaging causes of bad presentations is what is commonly known as ‘Death by PowerPoint’ where the accompanying slides have masses of detail which the presenter actually reads off the screen. I suspect we have all sat through such presentations at some time or another; and an excellent yardstick of how boring some presenters are is the sight of people in the audience actually nodding off in the middle of the event.

Do you think more emphasis should be put on teaching presentation skills at an early age?

Very much so, since many of the techniques will be applicable in other walks of life: Some schools have debating societies which are excellent forums to learn speaking techniques, body language and gauging audience reaction.

Have you noticed any cultural differences in attitudes towards giving presentations?

I have been very lucky in my varied career to have worked and travelled in many parts of the world, including Europe, America, the Middle East and Asia. Although cultural differences obviously play a part in the way presentations are given, the basic tenets of good presentation skills still apply.

Having said that, any self respecting presenter would do well to research some of the basic dos and don'ts of any country in which they are asked to give a talk. In Asia, for instance, age and experience is more widely respected than in the West and this can affect something as basic as the seating arrangements in the room, or the protocol of whom you should address first.

Likewise in the Middle East, regardless of the logical order you might want to impart information, you have to remember that there is a very strict hierarchy in terms of which Sheikh or Amir should be addressed first, or even referred to in the speech. On Saudi TV, for instance, the news would always start with a report of what the King or another member of the Royal Family had done – even something as seemingly inconsequential as sending

birthday greetings to another ruler, even if there was an important breaking story that would be guaranteed prime time in any other bulletins around the world.

Likewise on the printed page or on a PowerPoint slide, you cannot place a picture of a Sheikh below a picture of a commoner. Dress codes, too, vary. Foreign ministers travelling abroad - especially female foreign ministers - dress quite differently depending on the venue and how 'conservative' that venue is.

How important is it to 'know' your audience?

This is absolutely vital. To gain maximum impact, you have to understand why your audience is there in the first place. By imparting information in a way that they will be able to relate to will guarantee much better understanding and credibility compared with simply relating to your audience everything that is going on inside your head!

Which well known 'presenters' would you recommend people study to learn how it's done?

Watch the way successful politicians operate, as well as good broadcasters. They always say that successful politicians are expert in the art of well rehearsed sincerity! They, and good broadcasters, use their voices to maximum effect; their body language is self assured (and often well rehearsed) and the structure of what they are saying follows a well thought-through sequence so that one point follows on from another.

If you had to choose, which is more important, content or delivery?

Without content, what would be the point of delivering anything? But with poor delivery, why would you bother about the content? Or more importantly, why would your audience bother with your content? In some ways that's a chicken-and-egg situation!

Have you experienced any presentation nightmares yourself?

Plenty. At one of my first public speeches I totally lost my place in the argument I was trying to put forward and my mind went a total blank. The lesson I learned was to

Learn skills at branch events

CMI regional and branch events take place around the UK and provide opportunities to see and learn from presenters in action. There are also a number of events on the current calendar which may provide further insights into developing skills, for example, a site visit to BBC Look North (15 September/organised by Humberside branch), and a presentation by Ray Charlton of Transition Partnerships entitled *Exploring the extraordinary power of positive thinking and speaking* (20 October/organised by WIM Heart of England). For further information visit www.managers.org.uk/events

Find out more about presenting online

CMI members have access to a range of information on presentation skills in the online Subject Search service, including two checklists and two Leader Videos featuring Harvard Business School Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter and Lauren Flanagan, IT innovator and CEO of SCIO Corp. Information available to members also includes a definition of 'Presentation' and list of books - available to borrow - and journal articles. To access all these resources - which are free to members - please go to www.managers.org.uk/subjectsearch In addition, see the offer on this page to purchase Brian Salter's new book on *Effective Presenting*, which we co-publish with Hodder Education.

be fully prepared and to know my subject backwards.

On another occasion I was presenting a radio programme when a 'live' interview down a phone line went dead and I was left having to fill three minutes of air time. On that occasion I had read up the subject in great detail and I had to extemporise as to what the interviewee might have said had the line not gone down! Believe me; three minutes is a very long time to fill when the only thing you are aware of is that second hand slowly creeping its way round the clock face!

What is your top tip for nervous presenters?

There are a number of tips included in my new book published by the CMI and Hodder Education. One of the best techniques is one I learned in the BBC. Just as actors get stage fright, so too do broadcasters when their minds start thinking along the lines of how many millions of people are out there listening to them.

Radio presenters who are still new to the job sometimes place a photo of a spouse or friend next the microphone and speak to that special person, rather than think of the audience at large. That same technique can be transferred to a TV studio or a presentation in a conference hall; but this time the presenter has to imagine that picture behind the camera, or imagine his friend (or friends) sitting in the audience and then speak to them. It's always easier to speak to a friend than it is to speak to a total stranger. **cm**

* Broadcaster, presenter, trainer and author Brian Salter began his career in the BBC, where for a number of years he produced and presented features and current affairs programmes on the World Service (Radio). He also worked as an editor in the BBC World Service newsroom, in the BBC TV Newsroom, and in the Radio 4 newsroom on the City Desk.

Since then he has worked in a number of blue chip companies, in the UK, America, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and most recently in the UAE.

He was a founding member of the British Association of Public Speakers and has given many talks and presentations throughout his varied career. He also trained announcers in BBC Radio 4 and has trained businessmen in effective public speaking.

He has written 23 books including four for the Chartered Management Institute (published by Hodder).



Reader offer

*Readers of Professional Manager can purchase *Instant Manager: Effective Presenting* by Brian Salter, and other titles in the series, at £2 off the recommended retail price (RRP is £9.99 for new title), including free postage and packing. Order online at www.presseoffers.co.uk/HOD194 or telephone 0870 755 2122, quoting offer code HOD194. Lines are open Monday to Friday between 9.00am and 5.00pm.