

HOW TO TURN LAWYERS INTO ENGAGING PRESENTERS IN ONE EASY LESSON

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I. Audience Analysis

Your presentation may be brilliantly conceived and carefully crafted, but it will fall upon deaf ears if it fails to meet the needs -- and capture the interest -- of your audience. Like any broadcast, your presentation must be fine-tuned to the frequency of your listeners. Unless you are transmitting on this wavelength, your audience will tune you out in a heartbeat!

Before taking out your legal pad or clicking on your power point program, ask yourself three critical questions:

1. "What do these people really care about?"
2. "What can I say that will advance *their agenda*, that will help them achieve *their goals*?"
3. "Which parts of this presentation are likely to *bore them to tears*, or send them *screaming from the room*?"

These parts have to go. No matter how compelling these facts and insights may seem to you, get rid of them! If you are ruthless in your editing at the outset, you will save yourself and your audience a lot of pain and anguish. Remember: they care about *their needs*, not yours. Design your presentation to meet those needs – and by the way – to serve your own purposes as well.

II. Content and Organization

Much like a plane flight, the takeoff and landing of your presentation are the most critical points. Most speakers spend almost all of their preparation time on the body of their presentation. But it is during those first critical minutes – even seconds – of your talk that your audience – be they judge, jury, prospective clients or partners in the firm – will decide whether or not you are worth listening to. And if they check out early, you will find it very hard to get them back! Here are a few suggestions with regard to. . .

The Opening

- *A powerful takeoff.* The very first sentence of your presentation should be delivered with energy and conviction. Your audience will sit up and take notice, you will feel more confident, and your talk will have momentum right from the start. This is true, by the way, whether you are speaking to an audience of 500, delivering a report to a small group of associates, or having a conversation with an audience of one (especially if that *one* is the firm's senior partner.)
- *Getting comfortable.* This is also your best opportunity to connect with your audience. What do you have in common? Consider telling a brief personal story that illustrates this connection (eg. "When I was a first-year associate. . .") If your story is humorous or self-deprecating, so much the better.
- *A clear flight plan.* Where are you taking us today? Highlight the main points of your talk right at the top. Why have you chosen this particular route? Give us the rationale for your talk and – most important – tell us what's in it for us. Why should we stay aboard? When you land this plane, how will we be better off? Will the client prevail? Will the firm enhance its reputation?

The Middle

- *Less is more.* Law students are trained to be thorough and precise. These traits are essential to the practice of law. But these same qualities can cause your presentation to sink like a stone. Too much information and explanation will leave your audience dazed and confused. Instead select two or three main messages or themes. Ask yourself: "Which of my ideas and insights on this topic are likely to be of greatest interest? Which will be the most persuasive and of greatest use?" Choose accordingly.

- *The rule of three.* Once you have selected your three main ideas or messages, you must repeat them and illustrate them throughout your presentation – so they will make a lasting impression on your audience. Whether that audience is a judge or jury, a client or a firm partner, the success of your presentation will depend, not only on the strength of your argument, but also upon the clarity of your main points and the vividness of your examples.
- *Compelling facts.* Without solid facts behind them, your messages will lack weight and authority. So concrete supporting evidence is critical. But here again, it is important to be selective. Too much data, too many factual proofs, will weigh down your presentation, waterlog your messages and anesthetize your audience. An exhaustive list of facts is likely to overwhelm rather than persuade or enlighten. And there's another problem with all lists. They are inherently boring! Instead, choose your most compelling facts, your most impressive and persuasive data -- that best support your main messages. Use them strategically and sparingly.
- *True life stories.* Anecdotal evidence is usually inadmissible in a court of law. But in the court of public opinion, where your audience renders the final verdict, anecdotes and stories are an indispensable tool. Your own experience, and the experience of others, will bring your presentation to life, giving it color and texture – even drama! If your main messages are solid and your facts are accurate, putting these abstractions in a real life context will make them clearer, more persuasive and more *real* for your audience. Prepare at least one real life story or example to illustrate each of your main messages. The more relevant these stories are to the world of your audience, the more effective they will be.

The Closing

- *Landing the plane.* Whether you are approaching the runway at O'Hare, or nearing the end of your talk, you want to make a careful approach and touch down smoothly. A bumpy landing can spoil a good flight – and throw you off-stride just as you transition to Q&A (not a good thing). Prepare your audience for landing by crisply and concisely restating your main points. You may want to finish with a final story or quotation, provided it is brief and relevant. Then ***smile*** (more about this later), thank them for their time and attention, and wait for the sounds of their applause to fill the room.

III. Delivery Skills

UCLA Communications Professor Albert Mehrabian published a landmark communications study in the 1970's. This study has been replicated a number of times since. Through a series of tests, involving speakers from a variety of professions (including the legal profession), a broad range of topics – technical and non-technical, and widely varied audiences, Mehrabian was able to measure, with a high degree of accuracy, which aspects of a presentation had the greatest impact. Specifically, he looked at word choice, voice tone and body language. His study showed that word choice – the content – actually had the least impact – only 7 percent of the total. Voice tone accounted for 38 percent and body language 55 percent.

Based on this study, and my own 15 years of experience, working with attorneys and other professionals, good content is only a small part of any presentation. (Although Mehrabian did conclude that content is a *critical* 7 percent – ie. without solid facts and a well-constructed argument, a passionate delivery, by itself, is unlikely to win a case or persuade a skeptical client.) Consciously or unconsciously, your audience is also making judgments on your energy, enthusiasm, confidence, and a host of other qualities that cannot be communicated through content. Let's look at the two elements that make up the other 93 percent.

Voice Tone

The key here is *variation*. A monotone delivery will sabotage the most meticulously crafted presentation. To improve your voice tone practice:

- *Varying your volume:* Raise and lower your voice at different points in your presentation. If you tend to speak too softly (and most of us do), try projecting your voice, accessing your deep, resonant vibrato, to emphasize key points. And at other key points, try lowering your voice to almost a whisper, as you share with them a particularly valuable insight.
- *Varying your speed:* If you speak too quickly (and most of us do) – audiences will find themselves chasing after your ideas. They will soon tire of this effort and give up the quest. If you speak too slowly, they will become impatient and frustrated. Instead, find a measured cadence that enables you to lead the audience by the hand, serving as a tour guide through your presentation, making sure that everyone stays aboard. Then vary the pace. Pick up the speed, perhaps, while

explaining an easily understood idea. And then when you come to the really important part, *slow it down* – and all eyes will be upon you – as you impart your wisest counsel.

- *Varying the length of your sentences.* Absolutely critical. Three reasons why:
 1. If you don't, you will run out of breath.
 2. Too many long sentences will bore your audience.
 3. Short sentences will *punctuate* your talk.

Spice up your talk with short, punchy sentences – and brief rhetorical questions – especially when you introduce new sections: eg. “Let’s look at the precedents.” Or “Why is this important?” These short sentences command the attention of the audience. They also break up your text, giving it a more interesting rhythm. Too many long sentences will create a “singsong” delivery – and can have a severe lulling effect on your audience.

Body Language

Every presentation is a performance. It doesn't need to be *Hamlet*, but audiences need to *see* your confidence, to *feel* your commitment, to *sense* your authority as you deliver your messages. This requires:

- *Eye Contact.* To be persuasive, you must look the audience in the eye – all of them in a small group – many of them in a larger group. Make your points as though you are having conversations with individual audience members. Don't just glance at them furtively (or they will suspect you of being in the witness protection program). Instead, look at each person for at least a few seconds. This may feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but you will soon find that, instead of just *talking at* your audience, you are actually *connecting* with them.
- *Facial Expression.* Smiling is a good thing. It will *not* undermine your credibility. You will not come across as silly. Instead, your smile will convey confidence and friendliness. Use it as often as possible. (And if you are making good eye contact, you will discover that some audience members are actually smiling back at you. Most speakers find this reassuring!).
- *Movement.* It all starts with the hands. We move them naturally in conversation, especially when sharing an interesting story or amusing anecdote. But when speaking in public, they often end up locked together, or behind our backs, in our pockets, gripping a podium or a pen, or in some other awkward configuration. The result is a stiff appearance, and a lack of energy and animation. Instead, as you begin your talk, try using your hands (both of them) to gesture.

You will find that this hand movement will energize the rest of your body. Your eye contact will be more focused, your face will become more animated, and your voice tone will become more energetic. The larger the audience, the bigger the gestures. This, too, may feel awkward at first. But you will soon discover that the more you use your hands, the more natural it will feel. Your delivery will become more forceful and dramatic. And your command of the stage and your audience will increase exponentially.

IV. One-On-One / Meetings / Informal Conversations

All of the above principles apply to individual communications with partners, clients and colleagues. In a professional environment, every communication is a presentation. The impression you make, even in conversation, reflects your ability to persuade and influence others. Ultimately, your skill as a communicator, on every level and in every situation, will largely determine your success as a lawyer.

Here are a few additional suggestions for communicating one-on-one and in small groups where a formal presentation is not required:

Client Meetings

- *Dress for success.* Business casual attire is acceptable within most law firms today, but tends to be unimpressive to clients who pay large fees to insure that their lawyers mean business. Wear a suit.
- *Listen carefully and attentively.* Clients seek your advice, but first they want to be sure that you understand their problems and their position. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions, if needed, before offering any opinions or counsel. If firm partners are present, allow them to take the lead.
- *Speak their language.* Clients are easily confused by legal jargon. Try to speak simply and in layman's terms whenever possible. Provide examples and illustrations in the context of their situation or their profession. They will be much more likely to understand – and heed your counsel.

Meetings with Partners

- *Be prepared.* Your every interaction with firm partners contributes to their impression of you as a firm lawyer – and potential partner. If you go unprepared into a partner's office to discuss an important matter, you are likely to ramble, repeat yourself, appear uncertain and make a poor impression. Instead, take a few notes beforehand,

or at least collect your thoughts. You will be more poised, more confident and more successful. (You may also need to listen first. See above.

- *Be concise.* Come quickly to the point. Partners are busy. Time is money. Life is short. Enough said.
- *Be friendly and energetic.* Be yourself, of course. But be your most friendly and energetic self. Partners (and clients) care most about the quality of your work and the results you achieve, but they are also looking for positive, confident, dynamic advocates to carry their banner – and vanquish their foes. Make good eye contact and speak in a confident tone.

Phone Conversations / Voicemails / E-mails

- *All of the above.* These essential forms of constant communication are too often used ineffectively. In these interactions, preparation, organization and conciseness are the three keys to success. Your *voicemail and email* messages should be brief, well-organized and to the point. Otherwise, they are likely to be deleted or go unread.
- *In phone conversations.* Remember that we don't have the benefit of your winning smile and reassuring countenance. So the energy and confidence in your voice, as well as the clarity and crispness of your diction, are just as important to the listener as the clarity and coherence of your words.

V. Visuals

Whether using power point, slides, video, or flip charts, remember that all of these visuals are supposed to be *aids*! They should not take the place of the presenter. The audience's attention should be focused on you, the main event, at least 80 percent of the time. Too often, unfortunately, this equation is reversed. The visuals take center stage and the audience is subjected to:

- dizzying cascades of bullet points,
- stupefyingly complex graphics,
- and large blocks of dense and unreadable text.

Sophisticated audiences are unimpressed by sound and light shows, much less tedious reading exercises. They seek your knowledge and insight, your perspective, even your inspiration. Take center stage for yourself. Use your visuals strategically and sparingly. A few tips for creating good visuals – and using them well:

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- *Less is more.* Visuals should be few in number and each visual should have a bare minimum of text. Slides, in particular, should be simple points of reference, signposts that light the path, not treasure maps to be deciphered. These are my guidelines:
 - ✓ 5 slides for a 10-15 minute presentation
 - ✓ 8-10 slides for a 30-minute presentation
 - ✓ 3-5 bullets points per slide
 - ✓ 1-5 words per bullet point
- *Artistic License.* Avoid complex graphs and charts in a rainbow of colors. They are usually confusing and likely to cause eye strain, without illuminating your subject. But don't shy away from creative visuals. Pictures and graphics can enhance your presentation, **provided they are appropriate to your topic.** Imaginative or humorous visuals can serve to lighten up dry material and clarify complex concepts.

VI. Questions and Answers

- *In the line of fire.* The dreaded Q&A. This is the hardest part for many speakers. It's one thing to glide through your presentation without a bump. You have some control. But who knows what evil lurks in the hearts and minds of your interrogators? The answer: You do. If you know your topic, you know something about the kinds of issues and concerns it is likely to raise. And if you know your audience, you can be even more precise about these issues. From there it's a short step to anticipating the two or three toughest questions.
- *Is that your final answer?* The next step is to actually prepare answers for these questions (as opposed to hoping they won't get asked). These answers probably won't be home runs, since these are areas where your position is likely to be the weakest. But knowing you can at least get a single on a sinking curve will boost your confidence and enable you to respond with grace and composure (apologies to non-baseball fans: translations available upon request).
- *The perils of improvisation.* A public forum is not a good place for original thought – especially during Q&A. You can quickly lose credibility by trying to finesse an answer without being sure of it. On the other hand, “I don't know” can be a great response – if it's not used too often -- especially if it's followed by, “but I'll get that information for you.” Then be sure you do.
- *Tough questioners.* Treat them with courtesy and respect, but stay in control. Listen carefully to the *content* of the question. Try to ignore its tone. When the question (or attack) is finished, pause for a

moment and take a deep breath. Then calmly address the issue being raised by the questioner. Acknowledge the validity of the question, without reacting to the skepticism and negativity that surrounded it: eg. “I understand your concern about cost. I know that’s an important issue. Here’s how I would suggest we deal with it. . . .” Then go to one of your prepared responses to the sinking curve.

- *Getting to the point.* What’s most important in Q&A? Once again, it’s brevity. A long-winded response to your first questioner will frustrate and discourage other questioners. The Q&A may be over before it ever gets started. Some favor this “filibuster” approach -- it can get them off the hot seat before it heats up. But don’t forget: This is your last and perhaps best opportunity to emphasize your key points, to sell your ideas, and to win over your audience. The more questions you can answer effectively, the more you will satisfy the needs of your audience, and the greater the chance that you will achieve the objectives of your presentation.
- *The one-minute drill.* Try to keep your answers under a minute. Thirty seconds is even better. Don’t try to give a complete and thorough response. Instead, pause for a moment before responding. Ask yourself: “How do I get to the heart of this answer?” Go there. Your answers will be clear, crisp and concise. Your Q&A will be dynamic and informative. And your plane will land safely and smoothly.

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