

TOP 12 TIPS FOR PRESENTING YOUR IDEAS EFFECTIVELY: HOW TO BEST PRESENT YOUR IDEAS



Career success increasingly depends on how well you're able to sell your ideas and yourself. I've met brilliant men and women who were stymied in their careers because of their reluctance to face the tough job of putting their ideas into sellable shape. Many mistakenly feel that coming up with an idea is what counts and convincing others of its value somehow is a superfluous epilogue.

But a good idea doesn't sell itself. Effective presentations sell ideas, even ideas that are far from brilliant.

To get action on a proposal in most companies, your immediate boss will have to be sold on your idea. To do this, consider what your boss regards as important and then present your idea accordingly. Try to put yourself in their shoes.

If you have to present an idea to a group or committee, try to sell it prior to the meeting to one or two members. They often appreciate this advance confidence and are apt to rally to your side if and when the going gets rough during the actual presentation.

Know Your Audience

It also helps to know as much as possible about the people to whom you have to present your idea -- their temperaments, aptitudes, idiosyncrasies and preferences. Knowing their characteristics will enable you to formulate your presentation more effectively.

Thorough presentation preparation is vital. Ideas often are rejected because of minor flaws. Frequently, proper evaluation and presentation would have corrected these defects. When you present your proposals without adequate preparation, a few pointed questions can put you on the defensive. You shouldn't be forced to reach for arguments and reasons haphazardly. Instead, you should have spent time preparing your presentation by sorting through any objections that might be raised. That puts you in control of the situation.

Only after you've investigated your idea's soundness, prepared for objections, explored its operational potentials and developed a convincing presentation, are you really ready for a meeting. And don't forget to organize and rehearse your presentation. Be sure it appears polished, complete, logical and, as much as is possible, spontaneous.

- Have I completely examined and thought through my idea? Have I subjected it to stringent and objective criticism?
- Have I translated my idea's features into concrete, anticipated benefits?
- Is my presentation organized into logically sequential units?
- Does it attempt to cover too many points? (Due to time limitations, even some good items occasionally will have to be discarded.)
- Have I determined which points need special emphasis and highlighting? Are some of the minor points overemphasized?
- Have I checked all my supporting facts and evidence?
- Am I planning to use a sufficient number of examples, illustrations, visuals and analogies to reinforce the idea? Which of them can best help to intensify the participants' knowledge of my idea's merits?
- Have I orchestrated the rhythm and pace of my delivery so that it's varied and interesting?

If after completing the checklist you still are convinced that your idea is worth pursuing, it's time to prepare your presentation.

Effective Presentation Principles

1. The value of understatement and muted enthusiasm. Avoid hard sell or oversell. New ideas can't be rammed through with ebullient rhetoric. They require subtle, understated (but fact-filled) persuasion. Understatement frequently succeeds where hard sell fails; it's also apt to gain the confidence of more astute managers.

Understatement doesn't mean enthusiasm is absent. Enthusiasm is an asset in selling ideas. But while enthusiasm can be contagious, an abundance of it -- especially in the beginning of the presentation -- will put people on the defensive. Enthusiastic overselling can frighten people out of taking a chance.

2. Tell briefly what led you to develop the idea. Before presenting the idea, give a short background history of the problems that encouraged its development. Detail what led you to investigate the area.

3. Get to the point. Make your presentation concise. People get impatient with long-winded preliminaries and side issues. Management particularly tends to get annoyed with the person who uses 10 minutes to make a point that could have been made in 25 words. Some people introduce so many side issues that the idea itself gets buried.

Your language should be simple. Clarity is a must. Avoid jargon or highly technical language unless the people you address are at home with it. It's human to distrust what one doesn't understand. A clear, simple style is an essential component in the art of persuasion.

4. Showmanship through illustrations. A light touch of showmanship will help your presentation. The degree of showmanship depends on the magnitude of importance of your idea. In any case, it should be moderate, controlled and in good taste.

The most direct way of achieving this effect is through the insertion of easy-to-see illustrations, pictures, drawings, photographs, models, charts or whatever else seems appropriate. At the very least, you should use a chalkboard or a scratch pad and marker to illustrate your main points.

Illustrations help your audience to picture your idea, therefore understanding it better. Use a device that helps them visualize your idea in action. Mere verbal description overly taxes attention and lacks clarity.

5. Don't use unsubstantiated claims. Many sound ideas are turned down because unsubstantiated evidence of irrelevant arguments is used to support them. You must have a complete dossier of facts and figures at your fingertips that helps you explain what the idea can accomplish.

6. Introducing counter arguments. In meetings in which the audience includes one or several technically sophisticated people, include all possible counter arguments opposed to your idea and discuss them.

This two-sided approach will help you convince the more sophisticated listeners of the thoroughness that went into the idea's conception. It also frequently takes the wind out of any possible objections that might arise during the course of the presentation.

It's foolhardy to assume that counter arguments will do no harm if left unvoiced. If you think some members of the audience may have these arguments in

mind, it's better to bring them into the open. Be sure to include all negative arguments that are likely to occur. Otherwise, your intentions appear suspicious and your message loses authenticity.

When working on your presentation, make a separate list of the pros and cons. To list the negatives, view your idea with cool objectivity, as if from another person's viewpoint. Consider the objections one by one. Formulate a plan for handling them, regardless of whether you or your audience raises them.

Listing pros and cons helps you anticipate and handle objections and reservations with skill. It will also bolster your conviction about the idea's merits and thus add to your persuasiveness and self-confidence.

7. Don't fret over anticipated questions. You shouldn't get overly anxious about anticipating questions, because this might spoil your presentation. On the other hand, be prepared to answer all possible queries and give all the facts pertaining to the idea.

If you aren't sure about the degree of accuracy of your answers, don't try to hide it. State that you'll find out the exact answer and pass it on later.

Regardless of your idea's merits, a few people either will ask a series of pointed questions to measure the extent of work that has gone into your idea or raise objections citing why your idea shouldn't be adopted. Be ready to answer all objections.

While you should anticipate reservations about your proposal, you should avoid an argumentative attitude at all costs. It often creates the impression that you aren't confident about your presentation. An overly argumentative approach may also change the attitudes of the people listening to you.

8. Ways to neutralize objections. Objections to your idea will be raised. And some individuals make it appear that not only is your idea under fire, but that your overall ability to use good judgment is in question. The natural reaction is to argue back, to defend your idea, to raise your voice and to show that the objections are wrong. Aside from the confusion this may introduce into a presentation, argument per se is a weak method to counter objections.

A good technique is to ask questions with which the one who raised the objection has to agree. A series of such questions often shrivels the objection to its true size. It often adds up to a sound conclusion with which the objector is forced to agree.

Another technique of neutralizing objections is to listen to them in a calm, thoughtful manner, encouraging the one who raised the objections to freely expand and elaborate on them. Frequently, the more the person talks, the weaker his or her objections become, and he or she is apt to notice this and withdraw them. Not being as familiar with your idea as you are, he or she will soon have exhausted his or her points.

You should stay calm even if an objection is irrelevant. Careful listening enables you to detect the overtones of feelings and attitudes. It helps you to determine whether the objection has any relevant bearing on your idea or whether it's used as a vehicle to reduce your stature.

Power games, rivalry and status-seeking are, unfortunately, facts of life in many organizations. Presentations can put you in an especially vulnerable position. But even when you detect extraneous factors in the objections raised, avoid an angry rebuttal or an overly defensive counter argument. This is difficult, because our natural reaction in these situations is the "fight-or-flight" response.

Handle this type of situation by inhibiting your immediate urge to lash back. If you can accomplish this, you will remain calm and will find an effective response to neutralize the objection. To act otherwise would be courting disaster. Everybody present would be reacting to your angry manner rather than your idea.

9. Welcome suggestions or revisions. Try not to reject revisions that would improve your idea. Even if somebody suggests revisions that you believe add nothing significant, don't reject them. If you force others to accept your ideas without the suggested revisions, they're apt to later sabotage its implementation or future proposals.

While your manner should be confident and poised, never assume an air of superiority when presenting your idea. This may make others feel inferior. They may resist your idea even before you complete your delivery.

Benjamin Franklin realized the wisdom of "natural" presentation when he said: "The way to sell an idea to another is to state your case moderately and accurately. This causes your listener to be receptive and, like as not, he will turn about and convince you of the worth of your idea. But if you go at him in a tone of positiveness and arrogance, you are likely to turn him against your idea, no matter how good it is."

If at all possible, make others feel they're participants, "co-creators" of your idea, rather than passive listeners who must sit in judgment. The "we" approach, rather than the "I" approach, has been the single most important ingredient in many successful idea-selling situations.

10. Pay heed to practical details. You should give special attention to the practical details of your idea, how it can be executed and implemented. One executive at General Electric Co. says: "We should avoid any tendency to attempt to sell our ideas before we have a definite plan and program worked out to support it. For management very generally, and very properly, will refuse to approve any proposed undertaking that's not well-planned and thought through with regard to the practical details of its execution."

In addition, you have to be prepared for questions concerning the implementation of your idea. The executive continues: "We cannot count on others to have our vision to see what could be done with our idea. We cannot count on them to make a cost estimate based on what our idea might be. Instead, they'll estimate strictly on the basis of what we give them to evaluate."

11. Map out the steps to be taken. Outline what steps ought to be taken for implementation. An executive of a large firm recommends "Be sure to facilitate at least tentative acceptance by suggesting easy actions to take. For example, suggest the appointment of a committee for further study. Or suggest that an estimate of costs be prepared. Or suggest that a patent search be made."

Another way you can secure acceptance or at least circumvent outright rejection, is to offer to test the idea, if it can be done. Any idea that can be subjected to a pilot test certainly should get one. When ideas are debated, a poor idea, supported by a good debater, makes a better showing than a good idea supported by a poor debater. When, on other hand, ideas are tested, good ideas stand out.

When the idea cannot be tested in advance, spend extra effort on planning a step-by-step program for carrying it out. Any vacillation about what steps should be taken is apt to discourage acceptance.

If it appears that you'll be turned down and a proposal for a pilot-test receives a lukewarm reception, attempt to gain more time by suggesting that a committee look into the matter further. Gaining additional time can help your idea strike roots in audience's mind. With some of them, the roots strike a rocky terrain and wither. But with others, the roots may grow and become stronger.

12. Break off and wrap up. After you've presented your idea, arrange for a break and discussion period. The brief break will enable participants to sort through the various impressions and questions you've raised. During the final discussion period, don't press for a quick decision. Again, answer all questions as thoroughly and thoughtfully as you can. For your superiors to accept the idea, they have to be convinced that you have "lived" with it for a long time and that you aren't trying to push through something that you just stumbled upon.

At the end of your presentation and the discussion period, you should sum up the more salient points of your idea, the anticipated benefits advantages, the need that exists or can be created for the idea and why you think it should be implemented.

You should leave copies of your presentation with the people who were at the meeting. They may want to study it more afterward. It frequently takes time to grasp the potentials of a new idea and arrive at a sound conclusion.