Effective Presentations

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At one time or another, most people will be required to make a presentation involving visual aids (e.g., slides, overhead transparencies or the now ubiquitous Power Point presentation). The ability to make effective presentations is a core skill for most people. In today's workplace, it comes with the territory.

Here's a quick exercise for you. Grab a notepad, think of as many qualities or characteristics of effective presentations as come immediately to mind, jot them down and then compare your list with the points in the paragraphs below.

Characteristics of Effective Presentations

By definition, an effective presentation meets its objectives. It follows that an effective presentation has an explicit set of objectives.

Effective presentations are also marked by high-quality visuals and by smooth, practiced delivery. Handouts, too, should be of high quality. The content of the presentation and any supporting visuals or handouts should be relevant to the audience members and useful in light of their needs and requirements.

The qualities above are such that, given adequate information about them, almost any presentation could be observed and evaluated on a reasonably objective basis; that is, most observers could agree that the qualities were or weren't present. However, there are two other qualities that are more difficult to detect and they might be the most important: An effective presentation is *well thought out* and *practiced*.

In the next section we'll take a look at the process by which an effective presentation is made to happen.

The Process

An effective presentation "happens" as a consequence of four related activities, the "Four P's" of effective presentations. First, you must *plan*, *prepare* and *practice* your presentation. Then you must *present* it. The first three overlap and are separate from the actual presentation. All four activities are shown in the diagram to the right. Each element is discussed next.
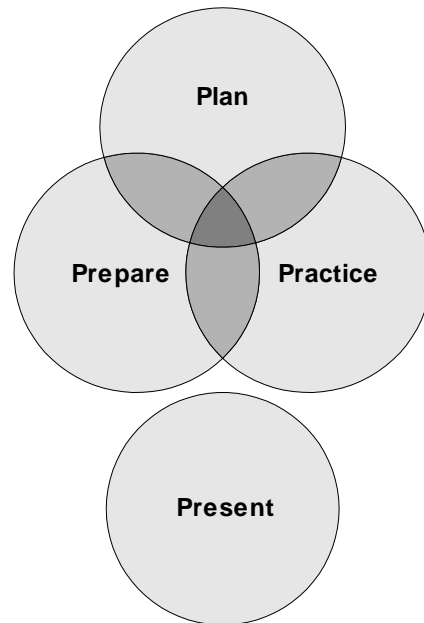
Planning Your Presentation

Planning your presentation means thinking ahead about important aspects of it. Here is where you begin the task of organizing your presentation. Here, too, is where you begin thinking about your visual aids. The important aspects of your presentation include the following:

- Objectives
- Audience
- Content
- Organization

- Visuals
- Setting
- Delivery

Each of the factors listed above is briefly described below.

| Factor	Comments
Objectives	Depending on the specifics of the situation there can be lots of factors to think about but two are always critical: *outcomes* and *purposes*. • What outcomes do you want from the presentation? A decision to buy? A request for a proposal or bid? Status as a preferred vendor? • What is the purpose of the presentation? To inform? To persuade? To report back? To enlist support? To sell?
Audience	Aside from knowing your subject matter nothing is more important than knowing your audience. • Who are they? • What are their interests, needs and requirements? • What "language" do they speak (sales, marketing, production, manufacturing, finance)? • What do they value? • What is their role in the sales process or the business relationship with your company or unit (decision maker, influencer, gatekeeper, approver)?
Content	Two issues are critical here: • The relevance and usefulness of the content to the audience. • The relevance and usefulness of the content to your objectives. Other factors will include *types* of content (e.g., financial figures, cost-benefit comparisons, comparisons with competitors, information about Arvin, product or engineering specifications, and so on).

Factor	Comments
Organization	Here, too, there are two critical issues:

* The issue of presentation organization in general.
* The organization of the body of your presentation.

In general, your presentation will consist of an opening, a main body, and a closing. The opening will usually consist of two slides: (1) a title slide and (2) an overview slide.

The main body of your presentation will have however many slides are necessary to make and support the points you are trying to make.

Like the opening, the closing will typically consist of two or perhaps three slides: (1) a summary or recap slide, (2) an action (e.g., ask for the order or propose a next step) slide, and (3) a contact slide (i.e., a slide indicating how your audience can contact you).

The organization of the main body of your presentation will be concerned primarily with the sequence or the order of the points you wish to make. Methods for determining the appropriate organization for this portion of your presentation include:

* Chronological
* Logical
* Flow or steps in a process
* Event-related

Setting	Some of the more common factors to consider here include:

* Seating arrangements
* Lighting and heating
* Size of the room
* Number of people in attendance

Delivery	Here is where you think about things like the following:

* The pace of the presentation
* Its organization
* Points of emphasis
* Time frames and allocations
* Portions that can be cut if necessary
* The roles of the presenters if more than one presenter is involved
* Provisions for practice

A Word about Approaches

There are two basic approaches to developing effective presentations (or to any other task for that matter): Serial and Parallel. Both work equally well as long as the approach used is consistent with the style, experience, background and preferences of the people who are developing the presentation.
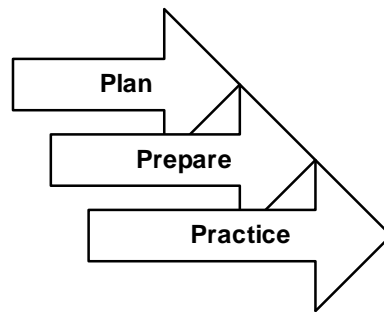
❑ **Serial**

The serial approach entails working on one task until it is complete, then the next and so on. Tasks are identified, queued up and completed one at a time.
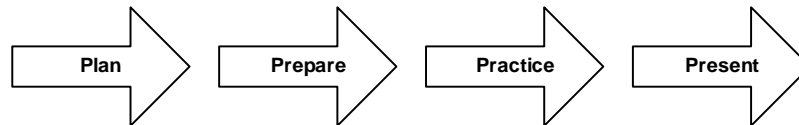
❑ **Parallel**

The parallel approach involves working on several tasks, working on what can be worked on at the time. The effort "comes together" toward its end.

Note: In case you're wondering, the Present stage is missing from the set of stacked arrows immediately above because only the Plan, Prepare and Practice stages overlap. The presentation itself is a separate, subsequent event.

Preparing Your Presentation

The centerpiece for this stage of the process consists of your visual aids and is addressed in a separate paper (see Effective Power Point Presentations).

Practicing Your Presentation

"Practice makes perfect" or so the saying has it. There are many good reasons to practice your presentation.

- You can practice alone for the purpose of getting familiar with the visuals and the content, especially to ensure that your visuals are legible.
- You can practice with others if the presentation involves more than one presenter. This will help ensure smooth handoffs.

- And you can and should practice with an audience to help identify the kinds of questions and issues that might surface during the actual presentation.

There are two words to keep in mind here: rehearse and *pre*hearse.

- *Rehearse*. To rehearse is to practice the things you *intend* doing.

- *Prehearse*. To prehearse is to practice the things you *might have to do*.

In short, you rehearse to give your presentation a polished and professional look and you prehearse to identify and be prepared to deal with any potential trouble spots.

Presenting

When actually making your presentation, there are many factors of which you must be aware, some of which are mastered only as a result of practice. These include the following:

- Facial expression
- Pace
- Voice (intonation, inflection, pronunciation)
- Body movements (posture, gestures, moving about)
- Use of a pointer (classic wooden pointer or laser)
- Roles (in the event of multiple presenters)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these skill areas.

Finally, a couple of personal tips about nervousness and self-confidence.

Personal

Nervousness is the factor most often cited by people when asked what makes them uncomfortable about making a presentation. This is especially acute among people who are new to making presentations. For most people this disappears with time and experience. Self-confidence grows with practice and experience.

Self-confidence also stems from "knowing your stuff," that is, from being well versed in the subject matter and issues that form the basis of your presentation. Ultimately, then, the ability to make powerful, polished and persuasive presentations derives from your knowledge and experience. All else is technique.

> Note: Following is a summary of the main points that have been presented. It is followed by an outline. Both can be used as checklists when planning and preparing your presentations.

Summary of the Qualities of Effective Presentations

- ❑ Achieves its objectives or outcomes.

- ❑ Objectives are relevant to the interests, needs and requirements of the audience.

- ❑ Content is relevant to the objectives and the purposes of the presentation.

- ❑ Well organized and thought out.

- ❑ Smoothly, professionally delivered using language familiar to the audience.

- ❑ Uses high-quality visual aids and handouts.

- ❑ Fits comfortably within the allotted time frame.

- ❑ Reflects the polish and professionalism that come from planning and practice.

Outline of Key Points Regarding Presentations

❑ **Process**

- ➢ Planning
- ➢ Preparing
- ➢ Practicing
- ➢ Presenting

❑ **Planning**

- ➢ Objectives
- ➢ Audience
- ➢ Content
- ➢ Organization
- ➢ Visuals
- ➢ Setting
- ➢ Delivery

❑ **Preparing**

- ➢ Seating
- ➢ Lighting
- ➢ Handouts
- ➢ Visuals
- ➢ Equipment
- ➢ Contingencies

❑ **Practicing**

- ➢ Rehearsing
- ➢ Prehearsing

❑ **Presenting**

- ➢ Facial Expressions
- ➢ Pace
- ➢ Voice
- ➢ Body Movements
- ➢ Use of Pointer
- ➢ Roles

❑ **Personal**

- ➢ Nervousness
- ➢ Know Your Stuff