

# Basic rules for success in technical presentations

Adapted from a series of articles by Richard Gaughan in *OE Reports* © SPIE 1995 and 1996

If you're like most people, the prospect of giving a presentation is daunting. Face this challenge as you face others in your career: Understand, plan, prepare.

Remember, your audience wants your presentation to succeed, just as you do when you're in the audience. Even if your competitor is speaking, you don't want the presentation to fail. You want to know what they're up to.

Your audience will remember only about 10% of your speech. It is up to you to ensure that they remember the right 10%. Say it right up front; don't save the best for last. Successful speakers follow some form of this rule:

- Tell them what you're going to tell them.
- Tell them.
- Tell them what you told them.

Focus on your message (the information you are presenting) while keeping in mind your purpose (the action you want to elicit on the part of your listeners). At a technical conference, in describing the extremely low aberration zoom lens you produced with only three elements, your purpose may be to get word out to the optics community that you are a hot-shot design and production house and that everyone should buy optical systems from you. But in that forum, such a direct sales pitch may not go over well. Present your message (you've got a great zoom lens) but evaluate your presentation in terms of your purpose (to promote your expertise).

## Message and purpose

To present your work effectively, you must entertain and impress. You say you just want to inform? You cannot inform if the audience is not attentive. Stimulate curiosity in such a way that members of the audience enjoy themselves. The presenter who fails to entertain and impress bores the audience, ensuring a forgettable experience.

As you begin, the attention of your audience will be divided. They are wondering what session to attend next, where to have lunch and with whom, etc. Your ideas have to fight for a place among these concerns.

- Show enthusiasm from the moment you are introduced. Tell what excites you about your project, and why.
- Tie your ideas into concrete images. If you say, "We can use cheap, low-quality windows and still measure 1/50," you have given the audience the facts. But if you say, "We could use a car windshield as our reference flat and still measure 1/50," you have given your audience an image that will help them recall your message.

- Vary the tone, volume, and rate of your voice. Use gestures to illustrate your points. Focus your attention on your audience. Look at them, not at the projection screen, the walls, or your feet.

## Making visual aids work

Visual aids provide a framework for your ideas, making it easier for your audience to follow and remember your presentation. Use them to enhance your message and support your purpose. If you have developed a blue diode laser, your message may be, our new diode puts out 8 mw at 490 nm. Your purpose may be to stimulate interest among potential customers. If you highlight this aspect of your presentation visually, you will alert your audience that you consider this to be important.

## Your appearance

You have probably observed that first impressions are important. When you stand up to speak, you make that first impression before you open your mouth. Professional speakers say they present themselves first, then their material. However, when we are giving technical presentations, the content can carry the presentation. The key is to dress so that you will feel comfortable in front of the audience — just realize that they will evaluate you in terms of your appearance.

## Pace, prioritize, and practice!

- Identify what you do when you're nervous, and do the opposite. If you pace and wring your hands, force yourself to stand still and relax your hands. It may sound silly, but it works.
- Concentrate on the benefit to your audience, and your ideas rather than your presentation skills will dominate your presentation.
- Organize and prioritize material, and limit the presentation to priority, rather than simply presenting lists of data.
- Practice your talk until you are comfortable with the way you present your material.
- Keep to your allotted time.

## Additional help

- *Secrets of Successful Speakers*, by Lilly Walters
- *Technically Speaking: Proven Ways to Make Your Next Technical Presentation a Success*, by Jan d'Arcy
- *Preparing and Delivering Effective Technical Presentations*, by David Adamy
- Toastersmasters International's local clubs in your area