

Well Said: How to Give an Effective Presentation

The good news is that the big financial report you just completed made a positive impression with the chief financial officer. The questionable news—at least to you—is that your analysis was so impressive, she's asked you to present your findings to senior management at a meeting next week. While you're

confident in your assessment of the data, you're worried about your ability to give an effective presentation.

Public speaking is a common fear. But with the right perspective it can be less intimidating. Remember that the focus of the presentation isn't you—it's your financial analysis. The more prepared you are to share these insights, the easier it will be on the day of the presentation.

Put it in writing

Some people prefer to write down their speeches word-for-word, while others opt for an outline format or general notes. Select the style that will help you stay on track while allowing you to make eye contact with the audience and avoid looking like you're reading. Your delivery should be conversational and your style interactive so that you can keep attendees engaged.

You may find it useful to write down the two or three key concepts you want people to remember after your presentation. Begin your talk with a basic overview and then focus on the details of these central ideas.

Tailor your discussion to your audience. Attendees may not have accounting or finance backgrounds, so always explain complex points in lay terms. Also, keep the use of numbers—such as dollar amounts—to a minimum, with most of your talk centered on your interpretation of the data in the report. This will make for a more interesting



presentation—and one that showcases your analytical skills.

Supporting materials, such as flip charts, slides, or graphics, can help illustrate important points, particularly when discussing financial information. Just be sure to keep them simple, using large type and short headlines with bullet points that can be read easily by people sitting at the back of the room. Handouts also can be an effective tool for reinforcing key ideas.

Improve your chances for success

In addition to developing an effective speech, there are other steps you can take to ensure your presentation goes as smoothly as possible.

The first is devoting adequate time to rehearse.

Conduct trial runs of your speech before colleagues, family, and friends, and solicit their honest feedback. Ask them specific questions about your delivery: Are you speaking clearly? Is the content of your presentation easy to understand? Are you making enough eye contact with the audience? Do you have any nervous gestures? Use their comments to make any necessary changes to your presentation.

Second, try to anticipate some of the questions that may arise at the end of your discussion. For instance, department managers may have specific budgetary concerns related to your report findings. Bring appropriate supporting documentation and files with you to the meeting for handy reference in case you need them.

Arrive at the meeting ahead of

schedule so you can familiarize yourself with the room. Make sure computer and electronic equipment are functioning properly and that you know how to use them. Take advantage of the additional time to re-read your notes so they're fresh in your mind. This extra preparation will help you relax and reduce the chances of potential problems during your presentation.

Maintain audience interest

Make an active effort to keep a slow, deliberate pace. It's important to give attendees sufficient time to take notes, particularly when you're presenting complex concepts or detailed financial information. You may find it useful to pause briefly after key messages to ensure everyone has

time to absorb what you're saying. And be sure to smile—it can go a long way toward establishing rapport with executives and conveying enthusiasm for the topic.

Don't fret or apologize if aspects of your presentation don't go as well as planned. Most likely, attendees won't notice the problems because they will be busy taking notes or considering the implications of your financial report findings.

Finally, try to end your talk at least 10 minutes before scheduled. This enables you to take some time to summarize the key points and invite questions from the audience.

Today, accounting professionals are active participants in business decisions and strategy. As a result, it's become increasingly important to be a confident public speaker so you can successfully share your expertise with others in the company. If your communication skills aren't as strong as they could be, consider taking a course on giving effective presentations. With training and practice, you'll feel less anxious about these discussions and ready to take on any future speaking engagements. ■

Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are Motivating Employees For Dummies®, Managing Your Career For Dummies®, Job Hunting For Dummies®, 2nd Edition, Human Resources Kit For Dummies® (Hungry Minds, Inc.); and The Fast Forward MBA in Hiring (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).