

2008-01-01

Communication for Business (4th ed.)

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Recommended Citation

McClave, H.: Communication for Business. Extract from Chapter 13, 'Giving Talks and Presentations' Communication for Business, 4th ed. Pp. 234-237. Gill & Macmillan, publishers, Dublin.

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**Extract from Chapter 13, 'Giving Talks and Presentations'
Communication for Business, 4th ed. Pp. 234-237**

DELIVERY

Overcoming stage fright

Some anxiety at the start of delivery is inevitable. The physical symptoms of nervousness - increased heartbeat, sweaty palms, quicker breathing or a tremulous voice - are undoubtedly uncomfortable but they need not detract from your performance. Indeed, they will hardly be noticed by the audience at all.

Nervousness is a sign that you are charged with energy and ready for a dynamic performance. In this respect, giving a presentation is no different from having a central role in any public event. Footballers, for example, always feel keyed up before an important match - and the moment of greatest tension is just before they run onto the pitch. However, once the match starts, their nervousness usually drains away and is replaced with an intense involvement in the game itself.

Similarly, the worst moment of a presentation is waiting for it to start. There are some simple ways of controlling nerves at this stage. For example, you could try taking slow, deep breaths or tensing and relaxing your muscles (e.g. tightly squeezing your fists under the table and then releasing them). Then launch into your presentation with a few well-rehearsed sentences.

Remember that most audiences are sympathetic and that the first positive response in the way of smiles or nods you get from them will give you all the confidence you need. Once your initial self-consciousness has disappeared you can then begin to exploit with growing assurance the great potential of this form of oral communication.

In the course of your presentation you should try to make good use of the following:

Voice

As we saw in Chapter 12, the voice is a marvellously flexible and versatile medium of communication. By using its qualities effectively you can both hold your audience's attention and enhance their understanding of what you are saying.

- **Clarity**

Speak clearly and out to your audience. Do not mumble into your chest. Articulate words with extra care.

- **Volume**

Speak loudly enough to be heard by everyone. After that, you can vary volume for emphasis or dramatic effect. You can always hammer home a point by raising your voice - but remember that a sentence quietly uttered can be just as powerful in its impact.

- **Pace**

Many beginners speak far more quickly than they need to - usually a sign of nerves. Try to speak a little more slowly than you would in ordinary conversation. Remember, also, that you can vary pace to highlight particular points. Deliberately slowing the speed at which you speak can give added emphasis. Quickening the pace can convey interest and excitement.

- **Pauses**

Do not be afraid of brief pauses. They give your audience time to assimilate your preceding remarks and you an opportunity to glance at your notes and decide what you want to say next. Remember, however, to pause in the right places, that is, between one thought and another, or before you move on to a new aspect of your presentation. This gives a natural fluency to your speech and sets up a sense of expectation in your listeners.

- **Tone**

Vary tone to suit your subject and the effect you wish to have on your audience. The choice at your disposal is considerable - you can be serious, light-hearted, mocking, cheerful, and so on. However, you must be careful not to adopt a tone that your audience might consider inappropriate. For instance, it is never a good idea to be sarcastic, or patronising, or to treat a serious subject in a flippant manner.

- **Accent**

Many people worry unnecessarily about their accent. A strong accent causes a problem only when your audience have difficulty in following what you are saying. The answer is to speak a little more slowly and clearly; attempting to disguise your natural voice will only make your talk sound contrived. In fact, a distinctive accent should always be regarded as an asset. So long as it does not obscure meaning it can be one of the most interesting and delightful features of the voice.

- **Using a microphone**

For large audiences a microphone is a necessity. Its disadvantages are that it distorts the voice, is often awkward to adjust, and, when fixed, limits the speaker's movements. Do not use it unless you have to.

Eye contact

Eye contact is an important element in effective presentations for two main reasons.

First, it enables you to build and maintain a rapport with your listeners. Humans use eye contact naturally to regulate and enhance conversation, so the audience will expect you to look at them. If you have good eye contact you will appear assured and in control of the presentation. In contrast, if you

continually look away or down at your notes, you will come across as shy, uncertain or even shifty.

Second, eye contact provides you with valuable feedback. If the audience is attentive and appreciative then you can go on with increasing confidence. On the other hand, you may need to take remedial steps if you notice signs of boredom, incomprehension or disagreement. For example, you may decide to introduce a visual aid, tell a joke, re-explain a point, or otherwise alter your delivery in some way that meets audience needs.

As we know, facing an audience for the first time can be a daunting experience. Nevertheless, the following tips should help you to use eye contact effectively.

- Make eye contact before speaking. This indicates you have something significant to say and gets the audience's attention.
- Look down briefly at your notes and gather your thoughts.
- Re-establish eye contact and begin speaking.
- Do not allow your eyes to wander restlessly across the room. Focus briefly on individual members of the audience.
- Be careful not to look exclusively at one part of the audience or to stare at individuals. This is intimidating for those who get excessive attention and upsetting for those who are ignored.

Body language

Facial expressions, gestures, mannerisms, etc. are also a significant component in presentations. A good speaker controls those that are likely to irritate an audience (e.g. compulsive mannerisms such as scratching one's head or constantly clicking a pen) and consciously uses those that add colour and interest to delivery.

The most sensible rule in presentations is to be as natural and relaxed as possible. Speak with confidence and your body language will take care of itself.

Humour

Jokes can be told at any point in a presentation to keep audience attention and provide light relief. Indeed, speakers with a natural sense of humour and the ability to make their listeners laugh spontaneously have a great gift so long as they use it sparingly. However, inexperienced presenters need to treat humour with some caution. Sometimes a joke seems forced or stilted and falls flat. In such a case the speaker has no alternative but to keep his composure and move on briskly. At other times, attempts at humour, particularly when a serious subject is being discussed, are inappropriate or in bad taste, and should be avoided. And, of course, a presenter should never be tempted into telling a vulgar, sexist or ethnically offensive story. Someone in the audience is bound to object - and object strongly.