

A Presentation Skills Company

The Message is the Message

Whether you are building a presentation for yourself or for someone else, managing the project begins with the development of the message, or the *script* itself. If you understand the elements of *character, construction and consistency*, you can build an effective story that creates impact for your audience.

CHARACTER

Presentations typically follow a standard communication model (Sender — Message — Receiver). The *human* elements of the process, the sender and receiver, are essential to the presentation process and crucial to message development. Since each end of the model is human, then it follows that elements of the human condition will work well when used in any message. Both the presenter and the audience possess unique human attributes (character), which need to be considered when developing a message.

Who's Talking?

In order to construct a believable message, you must define the personal attributes, delivery style, expertise level, and media preferences of the presenter. For example, is he or she outgoing? Does she like to interact with the audience? Is this a new topic for him? Does she like to present electronically? The answers to questions such as these will help you frame the message from the presenter's point-of-view.

One small example of finding a *character* trait can be discovered by asking the presenter to identify his/her favorite type of *movie*. Let's say the answer is an "action film". Look at the characteristics of an action film and you will find (among others) there are obstacles to overcome; split-second decision-making; and, a hero who saves the day.

Then, look at the script. See if there are any obstacles to overcome (problems that need solutions). Check for evidence of split-second decision-making (sense of urgency to choose a direction). Find the hero who saves the day (the big solution to the big problem).

Wherever these instances exist in the script, the presenter will deliver the content with higher energy and greater personal commitment. These are excellent places to tell stories or use specific examples from experience. These are the "high points" of the script for the presenter because they match preferred character traits.

As a presenter finds increasingly personal character traits within the details of the message, the impact of delivery increases because the presenter is so much closer to the material being presented.

Who's Listening?

When considering the audience, think of them, as **learners** – that is, as ones who need to embrace *your* version of the message, delivered from *your* perspective. The group needs to “learn” (understand) the logic (value proposition) you prepared.

You have options on how to target the message, depending on the *type* of learner. There are two types: STUDENT LEARNER and PROFESSIONAL LEARNER, each of whom assess information differently.

STUDENT learners are in a *required* learning mode and use gathered information in the short-term. This group includes traditional students; or, those in post-graduate education; or, anyone in a training session where the content is a "necessary" part of the learning *process*.

PROFESSIONAL learners are in a *desired* learning mode and use gathered information to enhance an already existing profession or skill. This group includes those attending seminars, continuing education courses, conferences, general-topic webinars, and other events where the content is considered an "added value" to a learning *experience*. Like student learners, professionals are learning, but they are using the knowledge to augment an existing practice or job function over a longer period.

Audiences can be (and many time are) a mix of student learners and professional learners, which is why messages meant for either group can have some impact on each group.

Regardless of learner type, you can broaden your appeal by looking for a “uniqueness” or for specific *differences* within a given population, by focusing on the *external* elements associated with groups of people. Another approach is to consider a “generality” or *similarities* within a group, by targeting the *internal* elements affecting people.

On the Outside

Patterns that are visible represent *outside* data. This information is usually measured and documented in some type of experience or research. This approach is to segment and target *shared differences* within a group of people. Hence, the scope of the message appeals to particular individuals within the audience who share a pattern or *diversity*.

For example, by analyzing audience *demographics* (average age, gender ratio, expertise level, and cultural issues) you can employ methods to break through their filters. Thus, if your audience is composed primarily of individuals who speak English as a *second* language, you will need to keep the wording simple and rely more on visualization or graphical descriptions.

Similarly, by playing to the demographic of *average age*, you can target the point at which the audience shared the age of fifteen. So, if the group averages age 35, you can look back 20 years to find experiences that evoke mid-teen memories and you can comfortably make nostalgic references to the music of the era, the political landscape, etc. What occurred for a person at (or about) the age of fifteen usually stays in memory (in detail) forever.

On the Inside

Another approach to reaching the audience is to appeal to the *inside* issues within people. The audience shares an underlying *emotional* attachment to a message. This attachment directs or even compels the group to some action. We call this a *motivator*. Once identified, you can target information to appeal to that motivator.

We respond to five basic *motivators*: pride, profit, love, fear, and need. Decide which will best motivate your audience and employ tactics to achieve that emotional response. To use pride as a motivator, reinforce the group's accomplishments and encourage them to achieve more. To motivate through need, clearly define the void and provide a means for filling it.

CONSTRUCTION

Constructing a presentation requires a *zing*, a *hook*, and a *flow*. The zing is based on your conclusion and ironically, it is your starting point when constructing the message.

Do Your Conclusion First

By building your conclusion first, you create a target at which you can continually aim. What is the *last thing* you intend to say to the audience? What is the final concluding remark? Then consider this question: How do you want the audience to *think*, *feel*, and *behave* when the presentation is over? This is the *call to action* for the audience. Your presentation should have a *measurable* call to action.

If an audience is given a *tangible* task of some sort (like homework), they are more likely to act. If the call to action is really a call to *feeling*, then measurement of that feeling will be difficult to track. After all, how will you measure happiness? In any event, the call to action relates to your overall *objective*.

The objective is simply a *course of action* and should be stated in terms of action (to *do* something), such as: to sell, to inform, to teach, to motivate, to persuade. When the objective is stated in terms of some action, and a call to action for the audience is measurable, the presenter can predict (with reasonable certainty) the desired outcome of the messaging effort.

For example, suppose the call to action for the audience is “*to sign the contract*” and the objective (course of action) for the presenter is “*to create an immediate need*”. It follows that if the objective is successful, the audience will have an immediate need, which can only be filled by signing a contract.

Hook the Audience’s Attention

Knowing your conclusion and your call to action, you can now design your opening *hook*. Within the opening moments of the presentation, you have to intellectually or emotionally hook your audience so they are drawn into your message. The attention of an audience is highest at the opening and begins to drop within seconds. Toward the end of the presentation, the attention increases again.

An opening hook draws the audience in for a while, but to sustain their attention, you’ll need to incorporate a series of smaller hooks, or *grabs*.

Several devices will grab your audience’s attention: stories, examples, analogies, humor, interaction, shock, suspense, statistics, and repetition. These grabs must be carefully crafted and used sparingly so that they retain their ability to draw the audience.

For example, creating a good *story* requires attention to three elements: *time, place, and condition*. In describing these elements, you must share enough details to paint a vivid, concise picture. The audience shares the details of your picture. Your vivid description keeps them from drifting into self-created images of the experience you are describing.

Keep in mind that hooks require attention. The audience must be able to concentrate directly on you. So, if you are using visual support (slides, for example), consider the design issues. When slides are “VIEWABLE” they “tease” and allow the presenter to “please” though explanation, experience and expertise. When slides are busy, they become “READABLE” and force the audience to either listen or read the content. This is more challenging for speakers when trying to hook learners with stories, examples and analogies at opportune moments.

(For more on visual design, see the handout *On the Big Screen*)

Structuring Your Ideas

The flow of your presentation is the structure on which you'll hang your ideas. To get started, capture your ideas with a graphic outline, such as a fish-bone diagram, flow chart, affinity diagram, or mind map. Next, organize the ideas into a structure that suits your objective. Most presentations follow a *linear* structure moving from the *open*, through the *body*, and to the *close*.

You can use one of several scripts for a linear presentation.

- *Matching Ideals* opens with a description of an ideal product, then builds (body) with a description of your product, and closes by describing how your product meets that ideal.
- *Main Points* opens by identifying all the points, builds by supporting each of them, and closes by reiterating the points. This is the most commonly used script (tell 'em what you'll tell 'em --- tell 'em --- tell 'em what you told 'em).
- *Question & Answer* opens with an audience test, builds by giving the answers, and closes with the audience repeating the answers. Or, opens with foreshadowing questions to gather responses and then uses the response at appropriate learning points.
- *Problem - Solution* opens with a description of a very bleak problem or unique challenge, builds by breaking the issue into smaller parts, each of which are addressed individually, and closes by rolling the smaller solutions into the resolution of the larger problem.

Of all the scripts available, the most *emotional* is always a problem-solution scenario especially since it opens the door for using *conflict* to position the message. Scripts that employ conflict, when constructed properly, tend to produce lasting impressions. (For more on managing conflict, see the handout *Seeking Similarity*).

The most important issue when creating a *problem-solution* script is to establish a *sense of urgency* for the audience. Sense of urgency is usually time-sensitive (by when). Without a sense of urgency, the audience may see the problem as minor. It would be difficult to place a measurable call to action on an audience that sees no sense of urgency to act on solving a particular problem.

The message might even target the “consequence of inaction” as a means to demonstrate urgency. For example, if the “problem” is *product shipping delays*, discussing the consequences of NOT doing anything about the problem (losing customers, holding inventory too long, etc.) will create a sense of urgency to solve the problem.

CONSISTENCY

Companies create and protect their corporate identities by spending millions of dollars on logos, signage, packaging, stationery, and public relations. Likewise, each employee's ability to tell the company story with consistency helps establish a verbal corporate image. To create this consistency, you must design and make available presentations that can be delivered by anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Avoiding the “H” Factors

In many cases, inconsistencies in the message arise from the original layout of the content. There are three common mistakes made in scripting that cause problems for both the presenter and the audience in terms of focusing on the original objective. These are the H factors: *History*, *Hierarchy* and *Horn*. All three of these issues should never be *displayed* visually during a presentation; instead, they should be *explained* vocally by weaving them into specific areas of the talk, when needed.

For example, the *history* of the organization should never appear in the form of bullet points on a text chart. A bullet point that shows the year a company was founded does nothing to advance your “plot” or argument. Unless your *objective* is “to identify a place in history” or “to show longevity” or even the typical “to establish credibility”, you will not need to display history in your visual support. A visual display (bullet point) forces you to play the history card at a moment when history may be less useful in supporting the current part of the message. Instead, you should *verbally weave* history into your message, allowing you to play the history card, vocally, *when needed*.

Hierarchy, as well, has little meaning to those not in the chain-of-command. The audience expects that all visible representatives of the message (the ones in the room) can address the specifics of the message. In other words, the presenter, at the moment of speaking, is perceived as the highest authority on the topic, regardless of title. In a growing world of global communication, everyone is as responsible as everyone else. Thus, hierarchy loses its impact. Instead of *displaying* hierarchy on your visual support, simply *discuss* the value that any one person brings to the table.

Be careful about tooting your *horn*. This often appears visually as a *list* of clients or customers. The list is of no value unless the audience knows exactly what you did with each one on the list. Instead of displaying the list, mention a client by relating your experience with that client. The *experience* should match the message.

Showing financial results is another way of tooting your horn. The fact that you earned a huge profit is less important for the audience than your actual use of that profit. Thus, *explaining* that a large percent of the profit is reinvested into research & development, leading to better products, is a better way to toot your horn than *displaying* a big number.

Portable Concepts

Portable concepts are those that can be used in a variety of settings by multiple people. Sometimes several presenters play a role in an event and the ability to have them appear as a functioning *team* is a challenge. For audiences to perceive more than one person as the messenger, concepts must be easily interchangeable (portable) among a diverse group of presenters.

The only way to do this is to create a message that leaves open areas (holes in the script) for each presenter to fill with personal experience. In addition, the audience needs to see the presenters interact in order to judge the players as being on the same team.

Hence, you may need to build dialogue to allow presenters to transition to one another during the delivery of the message. Friendly *banter* indicates relationships that are closer, as one might expect from friends or family.

Message Strategy

While there are many ways to define the components of a good message, the strategy is to arrange the content so it matches up with the elements that directly affect people.

While not in any specific order, the following items might be considered:

- Overall *theme* of the presentation
- *Motivator* for the audience
- *Conflict* within the audience
- *Relationship* to the audience
- *Objective* of the presenter
- Message *anchors* to control the logic and flow
- *Actions/transitions* using stories, examples and analogies
- Measurable *call to action* for the audience

Do Scripts and Say Scripts

Portability is also possible when you design presentations that are high on conceptual ideas and low on technical information. For example, if you wanted 30 sales people to relay the company mission, you could ask them to recite it word-for-word (technical). Alternatively, you could ask them to tell a story about a personal work experience that embodies the company mission.



This delivery could be supported by a visual that simply reads: “Customer Satisfaction.” The script itself, a *Do Script*, is conceptual and might look like this:

Visual (Customer satisfaction.)	Delivery Tell a story that describes a personal experience in which you helped solve a customer’s problem that resulted in extreme satisfaction and repeat business.
 (World map of office sites)	 Describe your relationship with other sales people around the country and give examples of how you share information and collaborate to achieve customers’ goals.

Do Scripts are like stage directions. They enhance the authenticity of the delivery and help each presenter develop a unique delivery style. This method requires little memorization, which reduces the chances for error and inconsistency. Simple visuals that don’t lead or confine the presenter are the key to effective conceptual presentations.

Say Scripts

There are times where exact wording is necessary — either because someone prefers to work this way and is good at memorization, or because you are presenting for “recording” purposes (audio, video, etc.) and need precise timing and archival evidence.

We call scripts that provide precise wording *Say Scripts*. You tell the presenter exactly what to say and require the person to memorize it word-for-word or to use a prompter. Here’s an example of a *Say Script*:

Visual (Customer satisfaction)	Delivery “As a world class provider of widgets, the mission of ABC Company is to build customer satisfaction into every product and process we deliver.”
 (World map of office sites)	 “We have sales and service offices in 40 cities worldwide, and they are all networked through a sophisticated computer system that allows our representatives to expedite orders and share data. For example, just last week, two sales reps solved a customer problem...”

The world is growing increasingly visual and visual creatures demand *eye contact* as well as action. The “say” scripts are rapidly disappearing from live presentations, but those scripts will be available when we communicate visually through technology. When we begin to see one another across a device, like TV or a PC, we will be able to script ourselves for those lecture-based moments. Then, we will be able to read though our own private prompter, just like a newscaster.

Through-line of Action

If there is something *personal* to you that matches something *specific* in your message and matches something *inherent* in the company mission, you have a through-line of action. This *thread* is extremely difficult to achieve, but in those instances where a through-line does exist, you will be at the highest moment of impact for your message.

Keep in mind, it’s not about the clutter, it’s about the *clarity*. As you create your presentation, remember that your message is the core, surrounded by many elements, including visuals, delivery, staging, clothing, props, and lighting. All of these “media” must support the message. They must never overshadow or upstage. With the instant availability of electronic equipment and instant access to “bells and whistles,” it’s easy to focus too much on the media.

You must remember that the medium isn’t the message.

The *message* is the message.

NOTE: The information in this handout supports the MediaNet lecture “The Message is the Message.”

Additional support for this and other topics can be found in several publications including:

- *Special Edition Using Microsoft PowerPoint 2007* by Patrice-Ann Rutledge and Tom Mucciolo (Copyright 2006, QUE, Pearson Publishing, MediaNet, Inc.).
- *Purpose, Movement, Color* by Tom and Rich Mucciolo (Copyright 1994, 1999, 2003, MediaNet, Inc.)
- *Mechanics-Basic Skills* free online tutorial (Copyright 2002, MediaNet, Inc.)
- *A Guide to Better Teaching* by Leila Jahangiri and Tom Mucciolo (Copyright 2012, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.)

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