

21 Ways to Improve Your Presentation Instantly



By Dr. Bill Dymont, Co-Author of Fire Your Excuses

It was ten years ago when I finally “got it.” I was seated in a ballroom listening to one of the top speakers in my organization and he was tremendous. Yes, his content was insightful, but what I will never forget was the way he crafted his presentation. Every minute, less in some cases, he utilized a different technique to draw us in as his audience. Almost instinctively, I found myself taking notes, not on his content, but on the structure and timing of his speech. It was truly a work of art. I knew that instant that there was another whole level of communicating to an audience opened up to me and I had plenty of homework to do. What he gave me that day was a new way of thinking as well as *template* for improving my delivery, content, and audience involvement.

Over the past twenty-three years, I have had the privilege of delivering more than 2,300 presentations to 400+ organizations. Yet, in a very real sense, I am still just getting started. There is still so much to learn and communication styles and technology continue to evolve at a rapid clip. Still one thing remains: The best speakers are truly performance artists and master storytellers.

What do they do differently from the rest of us? First, like a great orchestra conductor, they know just when to utilize each instrument of their trade, changing tunes often for today’s “ADD” audiences.

Second, they share far more stories than statistics. Florence Littauer, a highly paid women’s conferences speaker and author, only tells stories— with a strong message, of course. If she has 30 minutes, she’ll just tell two stories. If she has 45 minutes, she’ll tell three. That’s confidence!

Third, top presenters skillfully deliver content in multiple ways so that every learning style can appreciate and absorb their message. Finally, the “pros” see themselves as “edutainers,” imparting insights that are sprinkled liberally with classy humor. (For 20 tips on how you can create your own content-related humor check out, [The Science of Creating Humor](#).)

As a busy presenter, it is easy to fall into the rut of “good enough.” Some of the best advice I ever received was this: “Never believe that your platform enthusiasm can adequately mask your lack of preparation. Believe me, your audience and host will be polite, but they know the difference.

Feeling a bit discouraged by your own speaking ability? Don’t be. Charles Swindoll said it best: “We don’t just need experience, the school of hard knocks will give us plenty, we need guided experience.” The great news is that by utilizing just a few of the techniques listed below, you can instantly and significantly improve your own speaking ability in very little time.

(Tip: If you are a leader who has a big presentation to deliver where taking immediate, positive action on your message could mean thousands for your organization, hiring a presentation coach for an hour to help choreograph your delivery is the obvious choice.)

Speaker’s Toolbox: “The Pro’s List”

1. Start with a powerful story. This first tip is straight from the prime time playbook: One minute you are watching the painful elimination of your favorite “top six” singer in Hollywood, the next you are staring at a mysterious crime scene in Chicago. You are now watching a new show without even realizing it and “hooked” before you know it.

Grab your audience in a similar fashion: Don’t start with the “credits.” Just jump right into your opening story. Walk onto the stage, silently pause just long enough to make people a bit nervous, then launch into a great story. If you must tell your audience your learning points (big yawn) or give a bit of your background, do so only after your story.

2. No “death by PowerPoint,” please. Avoid bulleted lists and lengthy text. While audience members are reading your slides, they are not listening to you. Make your maximum number of words/slide 40 words, which the average reader can absorb in 12 seconds, so they can quickly refocus on you. An even better goal is no words on all or most of your slides—just display a symbol, image or metaphor for your next point.

3. Bring a prop. Props can be many things—silly, moving, or even nostalgic items, to name a few, but they never fail to reboot audience attention and serve to reinforce your message in a memorable way. I have a piece of the Berlin Wall I chipped off myself on that historic day in November 1989. What could you use as a “show-and-tell” item that adds interest, illustrates a key point, or brings back fond memories?

4. Invite an audience member to join you on the platform. Watch your attendees’ interest soar when you highlight, interview, or use as an assistant “one of their own.” Their attention is no longer on you but on their co-worker, colleague, or friend and they are much more interesting to your audience.

5. Quote today’s news. Drawing an illustration from a “hot-off-the-press” news story communicates that you are up-to-date and your topic relevant. Use the story to drive home a key point or as a topic-related humor vehicle.

6. Have audience members talk to their neighbor. Having attendees ask their “neighbor” a quick question is a great way to break the ice, especially if no one initially speaks up.

7. Use a topic-specific ice breaker. Nothing screams amateur than telling a joke or story that has little or nothing to do with the topic. The great news is that most illustrations have multiple applications that can be used to drive home your key ideas. Start collecting and customizing them by category for future use with a careful eye not to steal someone’s “signature story” or joke.

8. Create customized slides. Companies and organizations love it when your slides are branded with their logos, slogans and images. By the way, “stealing” from your host’s website for their own event is always welcomed and encouraged. It shows you care enough to go the extra mile to make their presentation unique.

9. “Roast” a beloved leader, value or slogan. People notice when you’ve learned the leaders, language, and the culture of their “tribe.” They also know when you could have delivered the exact same presentation in Topeka! Do a little homework and reap great audience good will.

10. Pause to read another’s work. People enjoy short quotes, even the classics in small doses. For special effect, create a visually appealing slide with the author’s image and quote. Promote important contemporary authors and you will enjoy “the halo effect” of authority as well.

11. Have the audience watch a video with you. As a general rule, YouTube videos are legally “fair game.” Check first, but don’t be afraid to insert a short, five minutes or less video clip into your presentation. (Hint: You’re not as interesting as you think for an hour.)

12. Use pauses and whispers to keep your audience’s attention. Even if you have a golden voice, changing up the volume and cadence is like throwing “a curve ball.” It surprises your audience and can jolt even the most smartphone-glued participants back to attention.

13. Play a game. “Gamification” is what it is all about these days. If you can’t work out how to turn some portion of your content into an interactive game, consult with a 20-year-old gamer!

14. Look at each audience member in the eye at least once for a second or two during your presentation. If you do, you will be viewed as engaged and fully “in the room” instead of speaking above their heads. Caution: Look at anyone longer than three seconds and you will be viewed as creepy.

15. Encourage audience members to use their smartphones as part of an interactive exercise or digital scavenger hunt (on your topic, of course.) As you do so, you are teaching your audience “how to fish” – to find valuable resources on their own or in a group.

16. Ply them with treats. A chocolate bribe, be it in exchange for audience feedback or as a place-setting surprise, is always worth your investment. Have healthy options too.

17. Use a bit of fun technology in your presentation. Have your audience text you their answers to a simple question or to complete a quick survey. You could use a web- or app-based program or keep it lower tech.

18. Give away your book or services as part of a business card drawing. By law, people have to be eligible to win even if they don’t give you their email address for your mailing list- your

reward. So, be sure to give them an opt-out. Most will be happy to give you their email if you do the drawing at the end of your talk when you have built trust, credibility and good will.

19. Use customized solutions and taglines. Brand your own processes, solutions, and programs. You could speak on “Conflict Management” or you could present your own R-E-S-O-L-V-E technique. (Guess which speaker gets remembered and hired again?) We talk about “Walking the Last Mile of Denial” and people never forget it.

20. Create a tangible take-home. In this digital world where business cards have been replaced with “just go to my website,” giving your audience something tangible besides a handout to remember your message really stands out. If it is three dimensional, that’s extra points.

21. End on a moving, memorable note. Never close your presentation with an anemic “Are there any questions?” [Insert cricket sound clip here.] Take care of any housekeeping items, then end just like you opened, with a powerful story.

Above all else, see your audience members, not as critics, but as potential new friends and encourage them to connect with you online. If you do, you will be right!