

Make Your Presentation Presentable

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Judges of the American Orchid Society are often asked to make presentations at society meetings, conferences, and seminars. We try to accommodate. But all too often, we fail to communicate with our audiences. Lacking speaking skills, our presentations are less than presentable. The audience turns off, the message get lost, and an opportunity is missed to convey useful information to people who want it.

It does not have to be like this. Anyone can acquire the basic skills necessary for creating an effective presentation and delivering it satisfactorily. All you need to know are a few simple preparation and presentation techniques.

Suppose you have been asked to give a talk. Here are the steps you might take in getting ready:

1. Set a time limit. Studies show that the learning curve for audiences is at its highest during the first 15 to 20 minutes of a talk. From 20 to 30 minutes, the curve flattens out. At 30 minutes, people begin losing interest and the learning curve drops. After 45 minutes, the audience quits, even if the speaker doesn't. With this in mind, limit your talk to 20 minutes. Leave your audience wanting more rather than wanting relief.
2. Know your audience. An audience of judges might be presumed to have more technical knowledge about orchids than a general audience of society members. The level of your approach and the language you use should fit your audience's understanding of it.
3. Aim your subject. Assuming you intend to speak on a specific subject at a particular level, aim your talk at the primary interests of your audience. If you have developed expertise in spotted Phalaenopsis, you may elect to report on "Trends in Breeding Spotted Phalaenopsis" if you are talking to a local society. If your audience is a group of judges, your slant might be "Qualities to Consider in Judging Spotted Phalaenopsis." Your talk should make a point. You should leave your audience with no doubt as to what that point is.
4. Organize your subject. Begin your talk with an attention-getting statement of 15 to 30 seconds in which you explain your theme and stimulate the group's interest in it. In this opening statement, include up to five key words or phrases as "triggers" that will signal the delivery of information you intend to provide. After your opening remarks proceed to make your points (no more than five), signaling each by repeating the "trigger" you planted at the beginning. In closing, summarize your points so that your audience will be reminded of

your message sequence has been succinctly described as, "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell it to them, then tell them what you told them."

5. Time the talk. Give you talk to a friend just as you expect to give it to your audience. Make sure that the language "flows" smoothly and the direction of your remarks is logical and easily followed. Include the slides you intend to use to make sure they are in the right order and that no slide remains on the screen for more than 20 seconds. Revise your script and prepare a copy in large print that you can see easily in a dim room.
6. Check out the equipment. Before you begin, familiarize yourself with the rostrum, the microphone, the projector, the screen and the lighting arrangements. If you expect to show slides, you will need light to read your notes. Make sure the projector and your carousel are compatible and that the projected image fits onto the screen.
7. Provide a biography. The person who will introduce you needs biographical information that only you can provide. Prepare it in advance and give a copy to the officer in charge.
8. Open decisively. Never start by apologizing. An apology for some imagined shortcoming merely calls attention to something the audience never would have noticed otherwise. Be friendly and positive in your opening remarks.
9. Relax and smile. Your best medium of communication is your attitude toward your audience. Studies suggest that seven percent of a message is delivered by the words a speaker uses, 38 percent by his tone of voice, and 55 percent by the body language he employs.
10. Stay in control. It is your speech. You are the expert. Stay in control of the forum. If you allow statements from the floor or permit general discussion, your message will be lost to confusion and misdirection. Questions can be delayed until you have completed your presentation.
11. Identify with your audience. Look for places where your experience overlaps with theirs. Use anecdotes or stories that exploit this common understanding. For example, "I killed four of those before I got one to bloom."
12. Keep it simple. Choose small words to big words; short sentences to long sentences; active verbs to passive verbs. Make points with anecdotes and use lots of examples. Don't tell your audience everything you know. Complete is for textbooks.
13. Make the big points. Every subject has its insignificant variable. Forget them. The audience needs the big picture, not the exceptions.

14. Close decisively. Don't just run out of words. Give your audience a clear-cut ending that reminds people of your basic theme.

15. Allow for questions within reason. An interested audience will want an encore, a fuller explanation of some important points. But be autocratic about taking questions. Some questioners may want to show off how much they now or seek to take you to task on some minor point. Discourage these. Either ignore them or ask the questioner to see you after the meeting.

16. Pass out your literature. If you have handouts, make them available after your talk, not in advance.

17. Remember the way to Carnegie Hall. Practice, man, practice! Go through your presentation several times before you give it. Know your material so well that if you lose your notes or the electricity fails, you won't be out of business.

Finally, if you suffer from stage fright, just ask yourself if they are so smart, why are they down there and I am up here? You are the expert. Be confident in that knowledge, and sock it to 'em.