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Business Communication

What It Takes to Give a Great Presentation

by Carmine Gallo

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David Crockett/Getty Images

Summary. Never underestimate the power of great communication. It can help you land the job of your dreams, attract investors to back your idea, or elevate your stature within your organization. But while there are plenty of good speakers in the world, you can set... [more](#)

I was sitting across the table from a Silicon Valley CEO who had pioneered a technology that touches many of our lives — the flash memory that stores data on smartphones, digital cameras, and computers. He was a frequent guest on CNBC and had been delivering business presentations for at least 20 years before we met. And yet, the CEO wanted to sharpen his public speaking skills.

“You’re very successful. You’re considered a good speaker. Why do you feel as though you need to improve?” I asked.

“I can always get better,” he responded. “Every point up or down in our share price means billions of dollars in our company’s valuation. How well I communicate makes a big difference.”

This is just one example of the many CEOs and entrepreneurs I have coached on their communication skills over the past two decades, but he serves as a valuable case in point. Often, the people who most want my help are already established and admired for their skills. Psychologists say this can be explained by a phenomenon called the Dunning-Kruger effect. Simply put, people who are mediocre at certain things often think they are

better than they actually are, and therefore, fail to grow and improve. Great leaders, on the other hand, are great for a reason — they recognize their weaknesses and seek to get better.

The following tips are for business professionals who are already comfortable with giving presentations — and may even be admired for their skills — but who, nonetheless, want to excel.

1) Great presenters use fewer slides — and fewer words.

McKinsey is one of the most selective consulting companies in the world, and one I have worked with many times in this area. Senior McKinsey partners have told me that recent MBA hires often try to dazzle clients with their knowledge — and they initially do so by creating massive PowerPoint decks. New consultants quickly learn, however, that less is much more. One partner instructs his new hires to reduce PowerPoint decks considerably by replacing every 20 slides with only two slides.

This is because great writers and speakers are also great editors. It's no coincidence that some of the most memorable speeches and documents in history are among the shortest. The Gettysburg Address is 272 words, John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech was under 15 minutes, and the Declaration of Independence guarantees three unalienable rights — not 22.

Key takeaway: Reduce clutter where you can.

2) Great presenters don't use bullet points.

Bullet points are the least effective way to get your point across. Take Steve Jobs, considered to be one of the most extraordinary presenters of his time. He rarely showed slides with just text and bullets. He used photos *and* text instead.

Experiments in memory and communication find that information delivered in pictures and images is more likely to be remembered than words alone. Scientists call it “pictorial superiority.” According to molecular biologist John Medina, our ability to remember images is one of our greatest strengths. “We are incredible at remembering pictures,” he writes. “Hear a piece of information, and three days later you’ll remember 10% of it. Add a picture and you’ll remember 65%.”

Key takeaway: Complement text on slides with photos, videos, and images.

3) Great presenters enhance their vocal delivery.

Speakers who vary the pace, pitch, and volume of their voices are more effective, according to a new research study by Wharton marketing professor, Jonah Berger.

In summary, the research states that effective persuaders modulate their voice, and by doing so, appear to be more confident in their argument. For example, they raise their voice when emphasizing a key message, or they pause after delivering an important point.

Simply put, if you raise and lower the volume of your voice, and alternate between a high pitch and low pitch while delivering key messages, your presentation will be more influential, persuasive, and commanding.

Key takeaway: Don't underestimate the power of your voice to make a positive impression on your audience.

4) Great presenters create “wow” moments.

People don't remember every slide and every word of a presentation. They remember moments, as Bill Gates exemplified back in 2009 in his now famous TED talk.

While giving a presentation on the efforts of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to reduce the spread of malaria, Gates stated: “Now, malaria is, of course, transmitted by mosquitos. I brought some here just so you could experience this.” And with that, he walked out to the center of the stage, and opened the lid from a small jar containing non-infected mosquitoes.

“We’ll let those roam around the auditorium a little bit.”

This moment was so successful in capturing his audience because it was a surprise. His audience had been expecting a standard PowerPoint presentation — complete with graphs and data. But what they got instead was a visceral introduction to the subject, an immersive experience that played on their emotions.

Unexpected moments grab an audience’s attention because the human brain gets bored easily. According to neuroscientist, A.K Pradeep, whom I’ve interviewed: “Novelty recognition is a hardwired survival tool all humans share. Our brains are trained to look for something brilliant and new, something that stands out, something that looks delicious.”

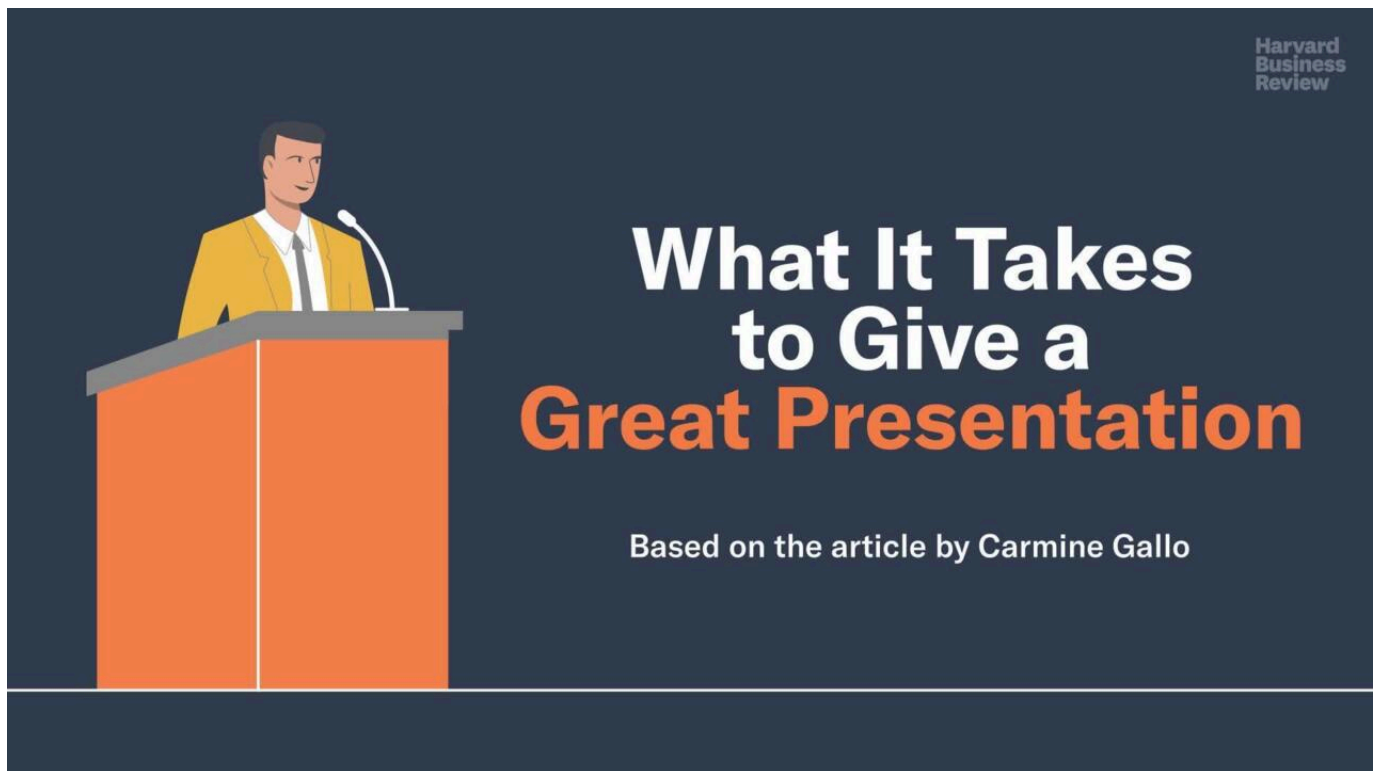
Key takeaway: Give your audience something extra.

5) Great presenters rehearse.

Most speakers don’t practice nearly as much as they should. Oh, sure, they review their slides ahead of time, but they neglect to put in the hours of deliberate practice that will make them shine.

Malcolm Gladwell made the “10,000-hour rule” famous as a benchmark for excellence — stating, in so many words, that 20 hours of practice a week for a decade can make anyone a master

in their field. While you don't have nearly that long to practice your next presentation, there's no question that the world's greatest speakers have put in the time to go from good to great.



Consider Martin Luther King, Jr. His most famous speeches came after years of practice — and it was exactly this level of mastery that gave King the awareness and flexibility to pull off an advanced speaking technique: improvisation. King improvised the memorable section of what is now known as the “Dream Speech” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. When he launched into the “I have a dream” refrain, the press in attendance were confused. Those words were not included in the official draft of the speech they had been handed. King read the mood of his audience and, in the moment, combined words and ideas he had made in previous speeches.

It's believed that King gave 2,500 speeches in his lifetime. If we assume two hours of writing and rehearsals for each one (and in many cases he spent much more time than that), we arrive at the conservative estimate of 5,000 hours of practice. But those are speeches. They don't take into account high school debates and hundreds of sermons. King had easily reached 10,000 hours of practice by August of 1963.

Key takeaway: Put in the time to make yourself great.

Never underestimate the power of great communication. It can help you land the job of your dreams, attract investors to back your idea, or elevate your stature within your organization. But while there are plenty of good speakers in the world, using the above tips to sharpen your skills is the first step to setting yourself apart. Stand out by being the person who can deliver something great over and over again.

Carmine Gallo is a Harvard University instructor, keynote speaker, and author of 10 books translated into 40 languages. Gallo is the author of *The Bezos Blueprint: Communication Secrets of the World's Greatest Salesman* (St. Martin's Press).

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