

Hate presenting? Get over yourself

If you've ever been asked to make a presentation or pitch, you'll be familiar with the visceral feeling that sweeps through your body and mind at the thought of it. Racing heartbeat, sweaty palms, butterflies in your stomach, mind racing at the sheer horror of it. No wonder that, for a fleeting moment, peaceful oblivion feels more appealing.

Temps de lecture : minute

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There's a piece of research (H. Bruskin Associate's American Fears study, which first appeared in the *Sunday Times*.) which reveals that the top fear in life is presenting in public. In second place, death. Apparently, most people would rather die than talk to an audience.

Yet I truly believe that the ability to give great presentations – and gain a reputation for doing so – is the quickest way to stand out from your peers and your competitors.

Great presentation skills are vital for entrepreneurs. They open doors to opportunities: present your ideas well and they are more likely to be bought. Give a compelling pitch presentation and you will beat your competition, win new revenues and build your business. Communicate clearly and you will motivate your team.

Over the years, I've worked with leaders in start-ups and unicorn businesses whose decisions make the difference between organisational success or failure. These people seem uber-confident and passionate about their business, and yet so many of them say to me: 'I hate

presenting. I really hate it.' And then do all they can to avoid doing anything that might help them become better. They won't write a script; they won't be clear about what key message they want to get across; and they won't, God forbid, rehearse. Instead, they rock up to an internal meeting, investor pitch or even a keynote speech and 'wing it' - speaking off the cuff (which is code for rambling on), fidgeting and pacing the stage (because they think they'll look like Steve Jobs - they don't), running on too long and boring their audience to tears. Harsh but, unfortunately, true.

One of my clients epitomised this approach. He said, 'I hate presenting. But I won't do anything to prepare myself to be better at it because if I do nothing, then at least I can blame my bad performance on the fact that I didn't rehearse.' There's a kind of logic to this but why when we take the rest of our business so seriously, do we allow ourselves to be so mediocre when it comes to presenting?

My response to this client and to every other client who comes up with this approach is 'Get over yourself.' It's a message that I first told myself when, like my clients, I spent hours twisting my thoughts into mental knots about why I was so bad at something and still did nothing to improve it. The reality is either you choose to do what it takes to improve or shut up with the excuses. As my son frequently says to me, 'No one cares.'

Well, that's not entirely true. I care.

I care because I've seen the transformation of individuals and businesses as they get out of old, ineffectual habits to enjoy vastly improved results by adopting a different approach to presenting. I care because I hate to see brilliance go to waste as great ideas are diluted or lost in a fog of badly presented, over-complex and instantly forgettable charts.

Here are three tips to make you care too:

- As Yoda said, 'Do or do not. There is no try'

Presenting well is really only about one thing. Practice. If you're not 100 per cent committed to practising (AKA rehearsal) then don't bother. I can be incredibly eloquent in my head, lying in bed imagining myself on stage wowing the audience, but I know that unless I do the hard work of planning, preparing and *rehearsing* (which means speaking out loud not just running through your words silently in your head), that image will remain what it is - a dream.

- Don't do it all at the last minute

A statement from the department of the bleeding obvious perhaps, but piss-poor time management is probably the biggest contributor to piss-poor presentations. Many of us love the adrenaline of the looming deadline but wasting between 20 and 50 percent of the time available by procrastinating instead of getting cracking immediately doesn't add a gritty edge of brinkmanship to your presentation, it just means you're on the back foot. Get on with it ASAP and aim to finish - rehearsals and all - 24 hours before the day of delivery. Imagine that - a good night's sleep the night before you make your presentation. It can be done and it makes a HUGE difference to your energy and attitude on the day.

- Less is more

We love to think our audience is soaking up our words like a sponge,

absorbing and remembering every line of our incisive thoughts. Yet we know from our own listening habits that this simply isn't the case. Our brains can only remember so much. So limit the number of key points you want to make.

A good discipline is to write down the one thing the audience *must* remember by the time you sit down. Write that point on a Post-it note - it forces you to focus on what's important. It stops you waffling. It's a self-editing tool to sharpen your presentation and it ensures that each section of the presentation has a point.

With a bit of practice, everyone has the ability to stand up and give a presentation, speech or pitch in a way that captures the audience's attention. One that actually makes them think, feel or do something as a result. All without giving you sleepless nights and raging anxiety in anticipation. And that's liberating.


Louisa Clarke is the author of 'The Work Smarter Guide to Presenting - an insider's guide to making your presentations perfect' - published by Robinson on 13th June 2024



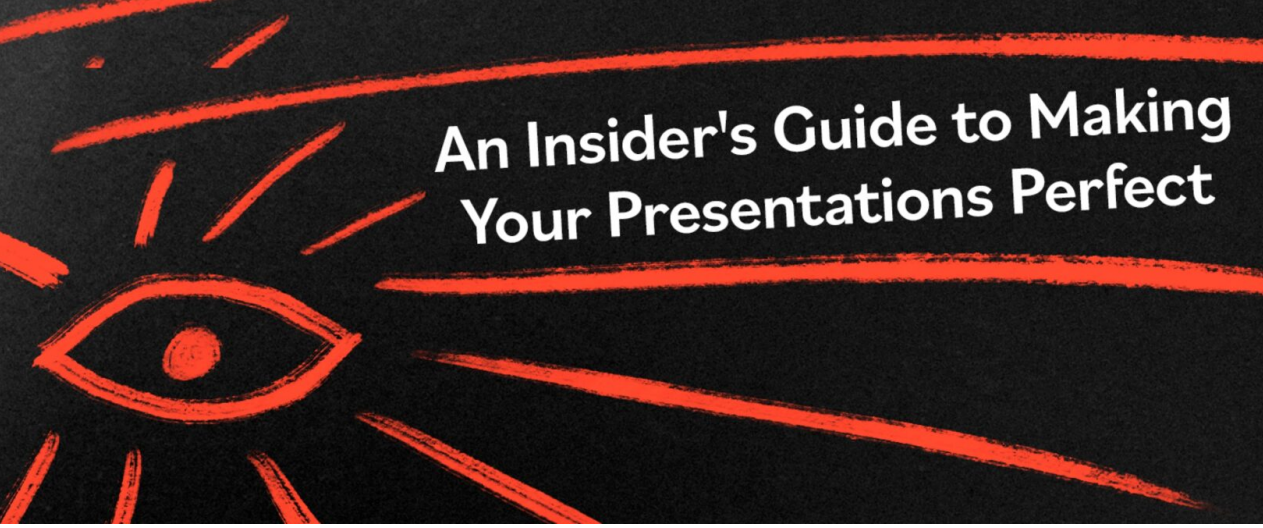
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