



Mastering The Technical Presentation



*Guidelines for Software
Demonstrations*

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Introduction

Most professionals will agree that the ability to deliver an effective presentation is a necessary and desirable skill.

In many cases, we choose to utilize presentation software such as Microsoft PowerPoint to facilitate the organization of the material and maximize the impact of our delivery.

In other circumstances, a presentation may require the integration of other software. In fact, the very purpose of the presentation may be to demonstrate a software system.

All presentations benefit from the disciplined application of a core set of guidelines that are largely common-sense, but nonetheless require training and practice to master. Presentations involving software systems benefit greatly from the application of additional guidelines.

The remainder of this document will discuss presentation guidelines in both categories, with particular focus on those relating to the demonstration of software systems.

Basic Presentation Skills

Basic Presentation Skill Guidelines are intended to maximize the impact of a presentation. As such they are largely concerned with the avoidance of methods and behaviors that can compromise the presentation. Although a thorough treatment of Basic Presentation Skills is beyond the scope of this document, a summary review will be valuable because the guidelines for effective software demonstration *build on these skills*. Failure to master these basics will compromise any Presentation, especially those with the added challenge and complexity of software demonstration.

Presentation skills can be organized into three basic categories, those pertaining to:

Presentation Skill Categories

- **Content:** The information to be conveyed to the audience.
- **Structure:** The outline and organization of the presentation.
- **Delivery:** The means by which the information will be conveyed.

A review of considerations relevant to each category follows. Although many of these points might legitimately be considered “common-sense”, we find that only through diligent review and practice do most public speakers master these skills.

Also note that a sequential dependency exists between the categories. Failure to adequately address any category is likely to compromise those that follow.



Objective & Audience

Content

The content of any presentation should be based on clear answers to the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the talk ? That is, what is it that you are trying to accomplish ?
- Who is the audience ?
- What do you want the audience to “come away with” ?

These considerations, combined with a realistic appraisal of how much you can accomplish within the allotted time, will determine the scope of your talk. They are also, arguably, the most crucial since failure to sufficiently address any one can easily render all subsequent efforts a waste of everyone’s time.

Note that it is important to prioritize the “take-aways” you have identified so that they can be presented in the appropriate order.

Structure

Most Presentations should follow the same basic outline. Below is a slightly formalized version of the classic mantra: “Tell them what you’re going to Tell them, Tell them, Tell them what you told them”

Basic Outline

- *Introduction:* This is when speakers introduce themselves, the audience is welcomed, and the tone is set for the remainder of the presentation. This is a singular opportunity to grab the attention of the audience.
- *Motivation:* This is intended to convince the audience that they want to hear and understand what you will be sharing with them.
- *Agenda:* This provides an outline of the talk, setting audience expectations regarding the length and content of the Presentation. Your policy on Questions can be introduced at this time.
- *Overview:* This summarizes the major points that will be made during the course of the Presentation. These are the “take-aways” for your audience and are your “Talking Points”.
- *Body:* This is the bulk of the presentation. It should be organized around the Talking Points.
- *Summary:* This is essentially a replay of the Talking Points and is intended to reinforce the take-aways for the audience.
- *Next Steps / Future Work:* This is intended to lead the audience to your desired goal.
- *Questions / Discussion:* The opportunity to ask questions and discuss the talk.

It is also useful to have slides for several topics that cover background material and that otherwise “did not make the cut” held in reserve. These can be used to help answer questions and as time-fillers as needs dictate.

Delivery

Delivery Considerations can be further classified into three areas:

Speaking Guidelines

- *Speaking*
All is lost if the audience can’t hear or understand what the speaker is saying. Good speaking style will hold an audience, and poor style will loose their attention.
 - *Speak Loudly and Clearly:* Use a microphone if necessary to reach entire room. Speakers that are not comfortable using a microphone should practice with it.
 - *Speak Slowly:* Especially for multi-lingual audiences
 - *Use Intonation:* Avoid the monotonous drone, use inflection to make your points and hold attention. Learn to “Pause for Effect” if it is not something that you already do naturally.
 - *Minimize non-words:* Avoid distracting verbal “tics” such as the classics: “uhmmm” and “ahhhh”
 - *Establish Eye Contact:* The smaller the audience, the more critical this becomes.
 - *Use Proper English:*
 - Avoid idioms and colloquialisms
 - Avoid/minimize unexplained acronyms and technical jargon unless audience is known to be familiar with them
 - *Avoid “reading” Slides:* Slides should support the speaker as he/she elaborates the points summarized on slides, not the other way around



**Be Aware of
Body
Language**

- *Body-Language*
Generally, all motion should be orchestrated to emphasize the speaker’s points and hold the attention of the audience. Any behavior that detracts from this is to be avoided, including:
 - Manic Movement: Adrenaline sometimes gets the best of a speaker. Frenetic movement distracts the audience and compromises the speaker’s message.
 - Distracting Movement: Rocking, pacing, etc
 - No Movement: A speaker frozen in place gives the impression of being un-interesting.
 - Turning one’s back on audience and “speaking to the slides”

**Effective use
of
Media**

- *Media:* The media is there to support the speaker. Anything that distracts from the speaker or competes for the audience’s attention should be avoided, such as:
 - Standing in front of the slides / media
 - Garish colors
 - Excessive animation
 - Distracting graphics

The above form the core set of Delivery guidelines. Failure to embrace them can doom an otherwise effective presentation.

Integrated Software Demonstrations

Presentations that include multi-media or live software demonstrations pose additional challenges for the Presentation team. Points to consider in this regard can be classified as follows:

- **Content:** This involves a determination of which system features will be presented.
- **Interaction:** This deals with how the Presentation Team interacts with the system being demonstrated. This is fertile ground for many common mistakes.
- **Coordination:** This deals with interaction within the Presentation Team.

Content

This involves a determination of which system features will be presented. Note that every feature to be demonstrated should support the Objectives of the Presentation and the “take-away” points you want the audience to remember.

We suggest that you start with the “Big Picture” and explain the purpose of the System, the role it plays within the Enterprise, and the Business Processes it supports. Walking through a Screen-Flow Diagram illustrating the sequence of pages¹ the audience will be seeing can provide valuable context for what follows.

Verify that all pages are clearly visible from the entire venue.

A common mistake is to project your own familiarity with the system onto your audience and forget that they are far less familiar with it than you are. In many cases, they may be seeing the page or window for the first time. Consider the following approach for each aspect of the User Interface you present:

**Supports
Objectives**

**Explain
Pages/Windows**

- Explain the purpose of the page, window, or screen
- Explain each region of the page or window
- Explain the purpose of each control you will be using
- Explain what will happen on “submit” or “OK”, in terms of what they will see next
- Explain what happens behind the scenes (between pages)

Note that you must be prepared to discuss each page presented in its entirety. This does not mean that every aspect must be discussed in detail, but rather means that no portion of any window or

¹ We will use “page” and “pages” to refer generically to high-level User Interface elements such as pages, windows, screens etc.



page is that is presented should be ignored. If you have done your job properly, your audience will try to absorb all that you show them, and may feel cheated and/or frustrated if only a fraction of each page is addressed. So say a few words about all portions of the page, in addition to emphasizing those aspects that are the focus of the demonstration.

Periodically remind the audience how the demonstrated feature(s) support your talking points.

Interaction

The interaction between the User and the System during a demonstration is obviously of crucial importance. Several tips and techniques can be provided in this regard:

- **Set Up:** If set up is required, be sure it is done in advance or can be done as quickly as possible. Note that this may include performing less important activities in advance such as activating the system, logging in, pre-filling screens, etc.
- **Choreography:** To avoid the unexpected (and unpleasant) during a demonstration, it is essential that an exact utilization sequence be defined, tested, and scripted. It must be repeatable.
- **Good Data:** The data that will be entered or appear during the demonstration must be “realistic” and of sufficient volume. Failure to do this will result in the system appearing less than robust. Unrealistic, amusing, or politically incorrect data will distract the audience and ultimately detract from effectiveness.
- **Data Entry:** Which fields will be filled, the data to be used, and the order in which the fields will be filled should be planned and scripted. Failure to do this can result in unexpected and highly visible system failures during the demonstration.
- **Uninteresting Interaction:** There is a temptation to simply rush through interaction between the User and System that are necessary but irrelevant or uninteresting. This is a problem because, if you have done your job well, the audience will want to understand what they see occurring on the screen. This is distracting at best and frustrating at worst.
- **Filling Gaps:** The speaker should keep the banter going during system processing. Even short delays can appear long if the speaker pauses and the entire audience waits for the system to return.

**Plan It
Script It
Stick to It**

**If you show it...
explain it**

To summarize this section we conclude:

- Plan every detail of the demo, Script it, and stick to the Script
- Any interaction that occurs in front of the audience needs to be explained

Coordination

This area is concerned with coordination within the Presentation Team. Considerations in this regard include:

- **Speaker Roles/Responsibilities**
 - Which portions of the content will be presented by each speaker ?
 - Who will introduce the team and coordinate transitions between speakers ?
 - It is generally best for the same individual to deliver the bulk of the talk, temporarily handing off to other speakers as needs dictate.
- **Dedicated Driver:** We recommend having someone other than the speaker handle the interaction with the system. This complicates the planning, but can dramatically improve overall effectiveness if handled properly.
- **Speaker Sets Pace:** The individual interacting with the system must follow the lead of the speaker, not the other way around.
- **Furtive Mouse Movement:** To minimize audience distraction during those portions of the presentation in which there is no interaction with the system, but the system is visible, there should be no mouse or keyboard activity.
- **Practice:** The only way to get comfortable working with your Presentation Team is to practice delivery with them. This will refine your Presentation and provide a reliable timing estimate.

Practice !



When Good Demos Go Bad

Despite the most meticulous planning, circumstances will sometimes conspire against you and threaten to ruin your presentation. The threat is particularly acute when the Presentation incorporates a live demonstration, because any failure of the system or infrastructure supporting it can render the demo impossible.

Although it is not possible to protect against every threat, it is prudent to have a contingency plan.

Backup Slides

In this context, this often takes the form of backup slides containing pre-filled screen-shots of the pages that would have been displayed had the demonstration system been available. These can be used in support of answers to questions and as time-fillers as needs dictate.

When Time Gets Tight

Be Prepared

Although you should practice sufficiently to derive a reliable estimate of the time required for your Presentation, the Presentation Team should be prepared to jettison the least important (lowest priority) portions of the presentation if time constraints demand it. Some forethought and planning in this regard can avoid confusion and mistakes that can occur when this decision must be made under pressure.

Summary

We have discussed various skills and strategies that enable effective Presentations, and have further examined those applicable when incorporating live demonstrations. We have seen that basic Presentation Skills form the foundation of any presentation, and that live software demonstrations pose additional challenges. Some of the more significant points presented include:

- Preparation is the key to any successful Presentation.
- It is essential that you understand your Objectives and the Audience.
- It is essential that you have articulated a prioritized list of “take-aways” to be communicated to your audience.
- Every aspect of a demonstration should be scripted including the sequence of operations, data entry, and points to be made about each page.
- Keeping the audience engaged and focused on the Speaker’s points is a delicate balancing act when demonstrating software. It is essential that distractions be minimized and explanations accompany everything they see on each screen.
- Practice will identify weaknesses and enable you to convert a good presentation into a great one.
- Preparation should include plans for abbreviating the Presentation if necessary as well as disaster recovery.



Affinity IT, LLC

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