

# Winning Presentations

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Wagner Consulting Group helps people deal with change by

- Helping business leaders prepare for ownership succession,
  - Developing employee management skills, and
  - Solving strategic problems.

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## How our brains work

The most important factor for a presenter to consider is what makes an interaction memorable. Then answer is emotion, and the reason is fundamental to human memory. A brain requires emotion to build a long-term memory. That's why memory experts teach students to associate a place/body part and pain or pleasure with what you want to remember. For example, I need to buy bread and I just dropped a bowling ball on my big toe.

- Emotions get our attention. Also, anything unusual is interesting.
- Deliver meaning (gist) before details. Overview in "90 seconds to launch."
- The brain needs a break because we lose focus after 10 minutes.
- Use a hook to trigger an emotion (laughter, amazement, etc.)
  - Hooks must be relevant to the subject.
  - Hooks link modules of the presentation.

Avoid what Jerry Weissman dubbed *The Five Cardinal Sins*, namely:

1. No clear point,
2. No audience benefit,
3. No clear flow,

4. Too detailed, and
5. Too long.

## Four Disciplines for effective presentations

### 1. Start strong

It's hard to recover from a bumbling start. An effective presentation immediately captures the audience's attention with a *90 second launch phase*. The launch phase contains:

- An **opening gambit**. This can be a striking statistic (1 out of 4 American workers have been with their current employer less than 1 year), a question directed at the audience ("Why is it so hard to find a decent ...?"), or a familiar saying or quotation.
- **What's the point** of the presentation? Typically, you want to persuade people to take some action. That's the whole reason you're speaking, so be up front and crystal clear. As you develop your presentation, begin with your goal in mind.
- **Summarize benefits** to the audience. Answer the "Why should I care?" question by telling the audience **what's in it for you** (WIIFY). For example, "Why should you care if your subordinates are motivated? Because it makes your job easier if they are."
- Give an **overview of your presentation** so the audience knows what to anticipate. For example, "I'm going to describe the four factors that motivate people and give you practical techniques to increase the motivation of your subordinates. When we're done in about an hour, you'll be able to take what you've learned this morning and immediately apply it on your job"

Again, your opening should be carried out in 90 seconds or less. Staying within this time limit ensures a crisp beginning because you won't have time to hem and haw.

**Tip:** Practice your presentation *aloud* until you get it right.

## 2. Use reference points

- Internal linkages are reference points within your presentation that help your audience tie the pieces together. Use forward (“In a few minutes I’ll show you …”) and backward (“You’ll recall the statistic on employee turnover.”) references to emphasize key points. Also, intermediate summaries keep the audience on track. For example, “Let’s recap. We’ve discussed Problem A, I’ve proposed three potential solutions, and now …”
- External linkages are designed to strengthen your argument for the “Point.” These references to people, ideas, or data outside your presentation include direct references to audience members (“For example, John Smith discovered …”), current events (“Last week this very thing happened on the Acme Industries jobsite.”), and questions (“Has anyone here ever had a Nebraska Nutgrass infestation in their lawn?”)

## 3. Stories work better than facts

Stephen Denning used a story to begin his quest to change the role of the World Bank. This story stimulated bank managers’ imagination and let them envision a Future Story. Future stories are not detailed, and leave room for the imagination. Denning’s story began, *“Last June, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia went to the Website of the CDC and got the answer to a question about the treatment of malaria.”*

## 4. Maintain a focus on benefits to the audience

This discipline requires that you know your audience, including:

- Their needs and expectations
- Their frame of reference (Investor, customer, regulator, vendor, employee, etc.)
- Experience, education, and culture
- Have they recently heard bad news? Any good news? What’s their mindset “filter”: Skeptical? Optimistic?

As obvious as this sounds, it’s easy to spend too little time thinking about what is important to the audience. Do some advance research if you’re not familiar with your audience.

“WIIFY triggers” help you drive home key points and move the audience to where you want them to end up – at your Point. These include:

- “This is important to you because...”
- “Why am I telling you this?” followed by the answer
- “What does this mean to you?” followed by an explanation

Use WIIFY triggers throughout your presentation to emphasize to the audience the benefits of your Point.

## **Presentation Mechanics**

### **Use good visual design for PowerPoint and other graphics**

1. Avoid being too wordy, and don’t overuse bullet points.
2. Don’t use more than 1 line per bullet (no wrapping!), and don’t use sub-bullets
3. Minimize eye sweeps by the viewer. Left to right, top to bottom is best (hockey stick).
4. Don’t use slides as cue cards
5. Avoid too much visual detail. Use simplicity to make the point.
6. Avoid dated, cheesy slide templates
7. Don’t use company logo except at the beginning and end of the presentation
8. Use a dark background whenever possible; it looks more professional.

### **Be aware of your body language**

1. Don’t hide behind a podium – ask for a wireless lapel microphone
2. Stand up straight, keep your chin up, and face your audience with open eyes and a smile
3. Gesture from the shoulder using the entire arm
4. When not gesturing, keep your arms at your sides, palms up, hands slightly raised
  - You can also keep your hands at just below shoulder height. This sends a subconscious signal to the audience that you’re open, yet they won’t even notice!

5. Avoid the Triangle of Death, defined by the screen, projector/computer, and presenter. This is common, but really BAD technique: Face the computer screen to pull up the next slide, then glance at the screen, then move to speak to the audience while stealing occasional glances at the computer or screen.

### **Use space zones effectively**

Humans respond differently to four space zones centered around them, namely:

- Public space: More than 12 feet away. We don't pay much attention to what happens in this space.
- Social space: 4 to 12 feet. This is more interesting to us, and is space where we mingle, flirt, and make initial connections.
- Personal space: 18 inches to 4 feet. We pay close attention in this zone because we are actively engaging with others.
- Intimate space: 0 to 18 inches. This space is what the name implies, and is reserved for relatives and close friends.

The main lesson here is that you're unlikely to engage someone more than 12 feet away unless you make yourself *interesting*.

1. A good presenter uses stage space and, if possible, moves into the audience space.
  - a. Begin stage center, after a while then move stage right, then stage left, then return to center.
  - b. At each stopping point make eye contact with people for 30 seconds at a time. The reason? Psychologists call it mirroring behavior; we even have so-called Mirror Neurons. When the other audience members see you "staring" at a person for that much time, they feel connect to you as well, as though you were looking at them. Our brains are weird!
2. Eye contact works both ways. If 80% of your audience is focused on you - great! However, if a significant fraction is not making eye contact, then you're in trouble and need to grab their attention.

3. Moving into the audience decreases your distance from them; you can move into the Social zone, or even the Personal zone. For the rest of the audience, their interest is piqued and those Mirror Neurons go into action. You effectively engage many people even though you're not in close proximity to them.

### **Dealing with Virtual Meetings**

Video conferencing or teleconferencing are poor substitutes for in-person meetings because the richness of face-to-face communications is diminished by loss of visual cues and important sub-vocal signals that don't travel well electronically. Use the following tips to make the most of virtual meetings.

1. Accept the fact that virtual meetings are imperfect communication venues and don't try to make them carry freight they can't. Save emotional conversations for in-person meetings.
2. Have a short stretch break every 10 minutes.
3. Poll the group regularly for their input to keep them engaged and to take their emotional temperature. Ask each person directly.
4. Identify your emotions, like "I'm really excited about this new plan and cannot wait to get started!"

### **Resources**

For more ideas on making compelling presentations, consider the following books.

*The Exceptional Presenter*, by Timothy Koegel

*Beyond Bullet Points*, by Cliff Atkinson

*Presenting to Win*, by Jerry Weissman

*Resonate*, by Nancy Duarte

*Working the Room*, by Nick Morgan

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You can also call Tom Wagner at Wagner Consulting Group for help with presentation design, content development, and delivery.