

Effective presentation skills

During your career as an information professional you will undoubtedly be faced with the challenge of giving a presentation, whether to your own small team or to an international audience at a conference. One of my mentors taught me four valuable lessons regarding presentations:

- most people will admire you for presenting anything to any audience;
- do not fear questions: in most cases you will know more than your audience and if you encounter a greater expert, learn from them;
- they will not bite – that's a promise;
- you will live through it and every time you will get better at it.

Based on my experiences as a speaker, I want to share some tips and pointers to help you sharpen up your presentation skills.

Have confidence

Remember that most people will admire you just for presenting to an audience – they know how stressful it is. When you feel confident, your body language and speech will sound trustworthy.

Know your audience

When you prepare your presentation, begin by finding out who your audience will be, how many people and what they are expecting to hear. Are they a group of new recruits who need basic instructions on navigating the intranet, or are you presenting to a group of peers on an expert topic? If you are addressing a small group you know, you can be more interactive and informal than you would be when presenting to an audience of hundreds whom you have never met.

If you are invited to give a presentation to a group you do not know, find out about your audience in advance so you can tailor your presentation and maximise the chance of success.

Find support for your purpose

Gather input and material to support the purpose of your presentation. You may want to quote senior management's view on your topic, or influential external parties like a research firm or user survey. If the purpose of your presentation is to convince your department about a new database, you may want to quote organisations that have implemented the database already. You should relate the proposed purchase to your organisation's objectives – in this case it might be to work more efficiently in a standardised way.

Put your presentation to the test

Practise your presentation several times before your colleagues, your

family or someone else who can give you feedback. It will ease your nerves, you will check the length of presentation, and things that are not clear to the audience will become obvious.

Ask your test audience to comment on your body language, as they will be able to give you an honest opinion.

There's no second chance for a first impression

Studies have shown that audiences will make up their minds about you within a few minutes, mainly based on how you look and how you sound. So look good – we react to someone before they speak. Think carefully about what you will wear – clothes strongly influence the way your audience will perceive you.

Sound confident: people are more likely to give weight and value to what you are saying.

Remember to speak up and to pace your tempo. When we are nervous our speech tends to get faster. Reduce the speed until you think you are talking too slowly; that is usually just about right. Don't speak in a monotone. Use the tone of your voice to emphasise certain words or concepts in your story; this is something you can practise when rehearsing your presentation.

Making and keeping contact with the audience

As I have already mentioned, body language makes up a large part of how the audience perceives you and receives your message. For this reason, making eye contact is essential. By looking at peoples' eyes we make clear contact, which is a very powerful technique during presentations. Make sure you make eye contact with the audience, for a few seconds per audience member – people will feel they are connected with you. If you have to look at your notes, alternate between looking at them and keeping eye contact with the audience.

Another way of keeping contact with the audience is moving on the stage or even moving close to the audience. Our eyes are naturally trained to follow moving objects, so your audience will pay more attention if you move. Check the stage or area before your presentation to see how much space you have to move around.

Finally, involve the audience by asking them questions. They can answer by raising their hands or perhaps you can ask a member of the audience directly. This is a change of pace for the audience and is often a welcome variation to simply listening to a speaker.

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This article is a condensed version of a chapter from Denie Heye's book Characteristics of the Successful 21st Century Information Professional, Chandos 2006, ISBN 1 84334 145 X. For more information, see the author's website at <http://www.dennie.heyne.nl>.

Aurora 2007 applications now open

The 10th Aurora Leadership Institute will be held at Thredbo, NSW from 15–20 February 2007. Applications are now open for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. For details on application procedures and costs please see the Aurora website: <http://alia.org.au/aurora/>.

If you have any further enquiries, please call the Aurora Foundation's secretary, Ian McCallum, on 02 6257 9177.

Aurora scholarship

ALIA members who wish to be considered for the ALIA Aurora scholarship must apply to Aurora as set out in the Aurora Foundation's call for nominations and indicate in their application that they wish to be considered for the ALIA Aurora Scholarship. For more information on the scholarship, go to the Aurora website or to <http://alia.org.au/awards/aurora.scholarship/>. ■