

Tax Warrior Career Tips

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My Top 10 Presentation Skill Tips

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When I was 16-years old, my mother accompanied me to a meeting of students selected to attend American Legion Boys State in New Jersey. I was one of four young men selected from my high school, but one of over 80 from my county—all of which were in the room with their parents. The local American Legion lodge needed to select one boy to represent the county as its delegation chairman. The commander asked those interested in this leadership role to raise their hand, take two minutes to prepare a two-minute speech on why you should be the chairman, and the rest of the delegation would vote on who's presentation was best.



Initially, I did not raise my hand. I had never spoken in front of an audience before and there were so many other smart boys in the room. Who was I to think I could lead them? At that moment, my mother dug her finger into my side, forcing me to raise my hand...high! Only six of us had the guts to make our case to the delegation (I didn't have the guts, my mother did!). To make a long story short, my presentation was deemed best and I was unanimously elected chairman of the delegation. It remains one of the proudest moments in my life.

Much of what I did that day is part of my preparation for presentations to this day. Since then, I learned so much more from mentors, readings and pure trial and error. I recognized presenting to groups would be a big part of my career in business. To be affective, I must engage audiences' senses beyond just what they hear. In this article, I'll share my top ten tips for giving effective presentations. Now, there are many more tips I could give, and I do in a presentation we give to college students. But these are the ten I believe are most important.

1. **Establish objectives** – Know what you are trying to achieve. Are you selling something? Are you converting minds to your ideas? Are you teaching a concept? Know what you want to achieve and measure it. For example, perhaps if 10% of the audience contacts you afterwards about our product, it was a successful presentation.
2. **Know your audience and venue** - Knowing your audience and the venue where you will present can shape your presentation. In my story above, I was speaking to a group of 16-year old boys...leaders in their schools. So, I appealed to their competitive nature and made

many sports analogies. I sounded like a team captain—someone they could relate to. I also knew my venue. Instead of standing at the podium like the other five boys, I wandered up and down the center aisle speaking loudly and clearly. Knowing the audience and the venue influenced the style of presentation I gave.

3. **Honor your time contract** – If you say you will speak for 45 minutes, don't speak longer. People's time is valuable, and they expect you to honor it. Speakers known to consistently blow through their time contracts with the audience find themselves with fewer and fewer opportunities to speak. I had two minutes to speak when I was in Boys State and said what I needed to say in about 90 seconds. Every other boy went over the time limit.
4. **Pay attention to "What they see"** – The way you dress, how often you smile and use eye contact, your posture and your delivery style (at a podium, sitting on a stool moving about, etc.). These are all the things that your audience will see and register immediately. Studies show that when we are not visually stimulated with a speaker, we shut out what they are saying in about eight seconds. That's not a lot of time to make the right impression. If in front of a business group, wear business attire. If speaking to children, wear bright colors. If you are the last speaker of a long day of presentations, get a wireless mic and inject energy by moving about while speaking. These visuals will help you keep your audience interested.
5. **Use your voice to create interest** – Vary your volume, pitch, tone, and rate and pace of speech to add power to your message and highlight important points. Monotone speakers cause audiences to lose interest. Even if their content is excellent and important, the audience will tune them out fast. Speak clearly and project your voice. Stand straight and speak to the person in the last row to ensure everyone can hear you.
6. **Lock up the UMM monster** – It is amazing how often we say "UMM" during a day. In common, one-on-one conversation, it's not that big of a deal. However, when you are center stage in front of a group, the UMMs become more obvious and can distract the audience from your message. Ronald Reagan replaced UMM with "well." Barack Obama replaced UMM with "So." Find anything to say to replace UMM. Anything sounds better; especially a real word.
7. **Find a public speaking mentor** – Note a public speaker that speaks in a style to which you can relate, and maybe emulate; a style that captures your attention, and that of others. Then, take the best of their style and try to incorporate it into your own style...to make a better public-speaking you! I like Bill Clinton's folksy charm and his ability to appeal to single members of an audience without losing the attention of the others. Motivational speaker Les Brown is also an inspiration. Over the years I have taken a little bit of each of their styles and made them a part of my own.
8. **Understand the power of "What you say"** – It is tempting, and rather common, to hear speakers use large, multi-syllable words when presenting. Or they may use short words rarely used in the English language. This is an attempt to sound smart or overly articulate. Don't fall into this trap. Million-dollar words often equal a two-dollar impact. And, you run the likely risk of losing your audience and building resentment among them. Instead, use

analogies and examples that the audience can relate to. Personalize messages when possible and speak as though you are speaking to a friend or colleague at lunch. Audiences always appreciate someone that can deliver difficult concepts in a plain-spoken way.

9. **Remember, you are the driver** – During your presentation, someone may try to hijack your focus with an off-beat question, a cell phone may go off frequently, a group may hold a distracting side conversation. Know who is running the show; you! Don't be afraid to establish control over the presentation. "Thanks, but that question is a little out of scope. Can we talk off line?" Can someone please either answer the call outside the room, or turn their phone off? I'd hate to have everyone else distracted." "Is there are question or concept you wish to share back there?" These are good ways to politely and affectively establish control without skipping a beat.
10. **Never say "That's a Good Question."** – Image if the person next you asked the speaker a question and the speaker said, "What a great question..." Then, a few minutes later when you asked a question, the speaker simply gave you an answer and did not say, "What a great question." How would you feel? You'd likely feel like your question was not that great. Avoid that uncomfortable situation as a speaker by simply answering the questions and treating them all equally. Your audience will appreciate it.

During your career, no matter the industry or profession, the opportunity to present before a group is likely to occur. These opportunities can open doors for you. Good communicators always find a home in business.

I hope these tips help you hone your skills in presenting and public speaking. Don't be too critical of yourself, but always look to improve. Treat your audience like friends having a conversation and all will work out fine. Good luck!