

Speak Like an Executive

Three tips to better executive speaking for senior managers. By Warwick John Fahy.



I am often invited to work with senior managers to improve their executive presence—especially how they communicate with key stakeholders. Top executives do not have a lot of time and very few executives have been taught how to rehearse effectively. If you only have a short period of time to get your next presentation together, use these three tips: frame your presentation, tagline your messages and vary your lifeorce.

Frame Your Presentation

When facing an executive audience, such as a board of directors, you need to help them understand the scope of your presentation for two reasons. Firstly, busy executives have so many issues swirling around their heads that you cannot assume that they know the scope of your topic. Secondly, senior executives do not want to know all the details.

That is why they hire you. You are the subject matter expert. So what this means is that at the start of your presentation, you must signal the depth of your content. By indicating to your audience that you will not dive straight into detailed charts and statistics you are showing

that you understand their expectations. Later on while you are presenting you may be asked for extra details, but don't assume that an executive audience wants to know every single statistic.

Example of framing 1: "Today, in the next 15 minutes I will cover the three main updates for Project X. I will not go into the data charts which I have provided as handouts. I will take a Q&A after each update. Shall we start?"

Example of framing 2: "The main purpose for this presentation is to highlight the options available to us following the discovery of Problem Y. Although this could take us into several related areas, we have decided to stay focused only on the short term solutions. This will take 30 minutes and I welcome comments throughout. If this works for everybody, I will start."

Tagline your Messages

Have you ever been asked to prepare a 40 minute presentation and then just before you come in to deliver it, be asked to 'slim it down' to 20 minutes?! I mean what are you meant to do? Speak twice as fast? Cut out the verbs?

A way to be always ready for this challenge is to properly message your presentation. I call this taglining. Consumer companies use taglines to create a memorable phrase that is linked with their brand. For example, since adidas introduced their "Impossible is Nothing" tagline, it has become part of their target audience's vocabulary. I call this type of message a 'meta-tagline' which summarises a broad theme or direction. Your presentation should have a meta-tagline. You can think of it as your high concept or movie title. (eg It's a Wonderful Life, Saving Private Ryan, Snakes on a Plane).

The main benefit of using this approach is that – together with framing – it helps you think more clearly about the key messages that you want to deliver. This is important as today's audience are busy, overloaded with information and distracted by mobile devices. You need to be able to deliver your key messages in a short time and make them memorable.

This is quite a challenge. Especially when most presenters can't even remember their own presentation! Reading off crib notes, turning around to speak off the screen or frequent looking up or down are signs that the presenter has not prepared adequately.

Once you have a meta-tagline, go down through your presentation section by section and ask "What is my key message here?" How could you summarise it into a short sentence or tagline. This requires some thinking and can be difficult when you first use this skill.

Once you have completed this, you should have an overall message or or concept (metatagline) and between three to five messages summarising the main section content.

Your messages can now be easily written on a card and memorised. With clear messages, you can tie your content together more naturally and then the content (data, statistics etc) are used to support your message. This approach makes you bulletproof to shorter presentation times and ensures you have clear messages throughout the entire presentation.

Examples of Meta Taglines:

Too broad – Quality Concerns

Too long – The most important quality concern we have today is in manufacturing

Good example – Three Essential Quality Changes

Examples of Taglines (for sections):

Too broad – Data insufficient

Good example – Two data gaps we must monitor

Vary your Lifeforce

Even a well framed and messaged presentation delivered in a monotonous and disinterested manner will be poorly received. Executives (and all presenters) have a bubble within which they are comfortable. It has been successful to get them to where they are today. However, I am often asked to help executives with strong technical backgrounds to make the step up to senior positions. This requires coming out of the comfort bubble which means overcoming deeply engrained habits. Common habits include being too softly-spoken, projecting a constant

(often low) stream of energy and little variety in voice and energy throughout a presentation.

I don't believe you need to be an extrovert to be a good presenter. Steve Jobs is regarded as one of world's best business presenters without being a hyper-energetic speaker. However, regardless of your starting point, you do need variety in your presentation.

The most obvious is to bring enthusiasm for your subject. When

you are enthusiastic, energy levels increase and this is very attractive to the audience. Think about how you talk about your hobbies to your friends. What gets your energy going? Talking about the sports results, mentioning your toddler's latest developments or sharing your knowledge with others? A good resource for enthusiastic presentations can be found at TED Talks (www.ted.com). Pick a topic and notice how the passion of each speaker is very engaging.

Examples of Lifeforce:

Take your next presentation and after you have prepared all the content (including messages), practice delivering it out aloud a couple of times. When you feel you are starting to get familiar with the flow, take the opening one minute and deliver it as though it was the most boring topic in the world. Then, go straight into delivering the same one minute as though it is the most interesting topic to you. Record both rehearsals. Playback and observe the main differences in your delivery. Pace and intonation of your voice. Energy delivered. Which one would your audience prefer to listen to? Which one would be more engaging and persuasive?

Use your energy and lifeforce to put a sparkle into your presentation delivery. Variety is the key to keeping your audience engaged.

Every executive can prepare effective, memorable presentations in a short time by using these three techniques; frame your presentation, tagline your key messages and vary your lifeforce.

Warwick John Fahy is the author of *The One Minute Presenter: 8 steps to successful business presentations in a short attention span world*. Visit www.warwickjohnfahy.com for free articles on speaking like an executive. ■

