

PRESENTING WITH IMPACT

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You are what you write and say. Your reputation with customers or colleagues often rests on a single interaction. Whether presenting in a boardroom or conducting daily business, you may only have one shot at communicating—not just your message, but who you are.

Creating Your Message: So What's Your Point?

You do have one, right? And a purpose? In any communication—whether a speech, email, report, meeting, cafeteria poster, or trade show hospitality suite—identify your purpose: to inform, persuade, inspire, coach, commend, warn, entertain, introduce, overcome objections, respond to concerns, or answer questions.

Once you've determined your real purpose, you can shape your one-sentence message as a road map.

Take a Point of View

Avoid hype as a form of persuasion. But remember that the absence of hype doesn't mean the absence of opinion. Hired to help an investment company develop and shape its message, I listened to four executive vice presidents as they presented their segments of the "official" company overview. The general counsel presented his overview of real estate investing and new regulatory laws relating to such. When he finished, I asked him, "Do you think real estate is a good investment for high net-worth individuals today?"

"Absolutely," he said. "The best. For several reasons." And he listed them for me.

"Why didn't you include those reasons in your presentation?" I asked.

"I did."

"I missed them."

"Maybe they didn't come across as reasons. But the facts were there. The investor could have drawn that conclusion."

"But why would you leave it to the listener to draw that conclusion?"

"Well, I'm a lawyer. I didn't want to come across as a used-car salesman."

For the next hour, we discussed the differences between hype and a persuasive presentation. After all, his organization spent several million dollars annually flying in estate planners, financial advisors, brokers, and potential clients to persuade them to invest in real estate. Why would he not want to lead them to a conclusion?

Be clear about your purpose. If you're asked just to dump information, do it. But more often than not, you're expected to take a point of view about the information you provide. That point of view involves the four S's of persuasion to make sure all your listeners arrive at the same destination: solid facts, sound logic, straightforward language, and strong structure.

Translate Concepts Like "Vision," "Strategy," and "Initiatives" to Specifics

If you're writing or speaking to an audience larger than one and using these vague terms, people are going to have different tasks in mind for their next week's to-do lists. Vision in Asian corporations often refers to plans to be executed 20 to 50 years into the future, while vision in American companies may refer to next quarter.

It's not just the lower-ranking employees you address who'll want more specifics. Political candidates receive as much

criticism for vagueness on implementing their campaign promises as they do for their positions on controversial issues. People demand the particulars.

Remember That Facts Aren't Reasons—Don't Just Show a Scoreboard

Even if a fact happens to be correct, it doesn't always double as a reason. For example, a salesperson may tell me that I can buy a caseload of off-brand PDAs for a special price of \$99 each to give to key clients as a gift at the end of the year to express appreciation for their business. The salesperson may interpret that fact as a reason to make the purchase: a low price, a nice gift for clients. I may interpret that same fact as a reason not to make the purchase. No matter the special price, giving an off-brand to key clients may not create a good impression and instead may make my company look cheap.

Facts are just facts until you interpret them as reasons "for" or "against" something.

Analogy & Metaphor: Juicy Details Deliver Big Impact

Analogies lead to conclusions based on a specific comparison and add significant impact to factual arguments. Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com, used this analogy in a recent report to shareholders: "Long-term thinking is both a requirement and an outcome of true ownership. Owners are different from tenants. I know of a couple who rented out their house, and the family who moved in nailed their Christmas tree to the hardwood floors instead of using a tree stand. Expedient, I suppose, and admittedly these were particularly bad tenants, but no owner would be so short-sighted. Similarly, many investors are effectively short-term tenants, turning their portfolios over so quickly they are really just renting the stocks that they temporarily 'own.'"

We talk about "prime real estate" in referring to the homepage of a website or placement above the fold in a newspaper or product catalog. Many human resource managers talk about "cafeteria" benefits to their employees. With just one word, this analogy implies that employees have a "menu" of benefits to select from, that a "parent" has agreed to cover the "total" invoice up to a certain amount, and that employees select according to "taste or preferences" from that menu.

Such comparisons as these don't exactly solicit an emotional response; they simply clarify a complex concept.

Metaphors, on the other hand, imply a comparison and typically evoke an emotion and a mindset. Both types of comparisons can be succinct yet powerful ways to manage how people think about ideas or situations.

If you wanted to make the point that someone was not fully engaged with his or her colleagues in a mission, you might use a war metaphor: "John ducks into his cubicle as if it were a foxhole. He needs to stick his head out occasionally and help the rest of us fight the war. Otherwise, the parent company is going to take over the entire department."

If you wanted to talk about how indifference to quality customer service could destroy your business, you might put it in these terms: "Our poor customer service has become a *cancer* eating away at our business. I see customers walk in here and wait 10 minutes before being greeted. Then once we *do* help them locate what they need in the store, they have to wait again at the checkout. Then they wait again at the loading dock. The longer a customer stays in our store, it's like our cancer metastasizes rather than goes into remission."

Metaphors and analogies, by their very selection, create powerful ways of thinking about issues and often evoke strong accompanying emotions that make ideas memorable.

Consider these points carefully as you develop your presentation. What's your goal? Craft your message accordingly – create, shape, and deliver with facts: analogies, numbers and statistics, research and detailed explanations, words and sentences that persuade listeners to believe in the point you're making.