



# The Art of Persuasion: Educational Presentations — A Primer

By Robert A. Creo

Earlier columns have addressed the lawyer's identity and reputation, explored self-awareness, perpetual learning, professional growth through civic service, fear and anxiety, preparing for the bargaining table and provided the basics of documenting the deal. This column, the penultimate one in a series on the art of persuasion, explores best practices for lawyers when making educational presentations for other lawyers, clients and the public. Although many of these principals and techniques may be effective in litigation or negotiation, the focus here is on presentations in group settings such as lectures, CLE seminars, conferences and workshops.

## What Are You Doing?

Every effective presentation starts with a clear understanding of its purpose. Your objective could be conducting a CLE or training seminar for a client or students on a topic within your expertise. Your motivation for presenting could be promotional, such as a public relations opportunity to place yourself and your talent before potential clients or referral sources. You might teach a class as an instructor or adjunct or be asked to be a guest lecturer. Professional organizations and community groups often solicit speakers from their ranks. You may have long-term, indirect objectives, such as honing your skills, improving your visibility or building your reputation and identity. As simple as it sounds, it is critical that you articulate this goal, commit it to writing and keep it visible during planning and preparation for the event.

## The Science of Persuasion

### *Focus on the Eyes*

There is a consensus that most people process new information and are more likely to retain it via the visual sense. Some research contends that up to 90 percent of the information that our brains process is dependent on our eyes. Studies indicate that when our eyes are open, about two-thirds of our brain's electrical activity is dedicated to vision. Many people can only remember even basic pieces of information, such as names, if they are visible.

### *Storytelling*

We have a biological and communal predilection for stories. According to one study conducted by *The Scientific American*, personal stories comprise 65 percent of our interpersonal conversations. It is somewhat paradoxical that we react to and remember what we see, but when it comes to building the coherency and executive functions necessary for decision making, talk matters.

### *Engagement*

Our brains and our thought processes respond powerfully to two-way conversations. Humans crave involvement and participation. Research shows that when people are effectively conversing and bonding, their brain activity begins to mirror each other's. This is called neural coupling.

## Forum and Delivery

If you will be one of multiple or co-presenters, develop a clear plan and delineation of roles. If the presentation is divided, be sure to share and review the disparate pieces and review for harmony and to avoid dysfunctional perspectives or deliverables.

For lectures and presentations to a mostly passive audience, uninterrupted human attention spans are usually 18 to 20 minutes long. This is why TED talks are 18 minutes long. Most people can retain three to five separate points from memory. Lawyers and other highly educated people, as well as audiences with expertise in the subject matter, may be able to remember and juggle seven separate items. This means that your presentation time should be segmented, with a specific allotment of time for each point. If the time is 45 minutes, determine the three key points and focus on them. If you have 60 or 90 minutes with a receptive or sophisticated audience, you may shoot for seven points. Nevertheless, you must still structure your presentation in small bites and use all of your tools effectively.

Make arrangements to get to the room early and test the equipment. Unless you are at a conference or school with high-end technology, the best practice is to carry your own audio-visual equipment and components to avoid any glitches. You must also be prepared to

deliver your presentation effectively should the audio-visual equipment not function properly.

Many speakers find it helpful to drink plain hot water before speaking, since this loosens the vocal chords. Obviously, cold drinks and ice may have the opposite effect. What conferences should provide on the dais is hot water, tea or coffee rather than ice cold water.

Whether you prefer to stand, sit, rove or a combination of these when presenting, scope out the venue in advance and plan accordingly with the hosts.

The larger the audience, the more I rely upon audio-visual and post-presentation handouts or outlines. I rarely provide participants with printed materials in advance because of the loss of control and impact from them reading ahead, out-of-order or otherwise being distracted. I may provide a one-page agenda for organizational purposes or as a lead-in or tease if I have created unusual or clever titles for the topics. If I use a specific story or case study, I always try to create a snappy, memorable title, such as “No Man’s Land,” “A Fishy Tail Tale,” “The Art of No Deal” or “Tomorrow Has Come!”

### Opening Options

Humor is difficult. I am uncomfortable when a speaker starts with a joke that is unrelated to the topic. A key principle to remember: You are not as funny as you think you are. I do find that starting with a comic or interesting video clip can be helpful, provided it directly supports one of the teaching points.

For educational presentations, my preference is to open with an exercise that challenges, surprises or hooks the attendees so that they are primed to believe that there is something new or interesting in this presentation. Adults learn best by doing. Connections are made between speaker and audience by involving individuals in the program.



One common opener is to post a sentence on a large screen and ask the participants to count the number of times the letter “f” appears in the sentence. Due to the way our brain loves shortcuts, the f is always undercounted by at least 90 percent of the attendees. A sizable majority will believe that have counted correctly (after all, they are lawyers and can read and count) until they are shown the errors of their individual and group ways. This creates engagement and a take-off point for discussion.

Quizzes are also a good tool since they immediately make the audience part of the team. They should be simple and not collected, graded or used in a way that might embarrass anyone. They can be true/false or multiple choice and be distributed before the attendees arrive so that they start the process of engagement. You can also show the questions on a screen and ask people to raise their hands to answer. Because the use of quizzes is audience dependent, it can also be risky. If they are used to inject humor or drama, they can also potentially distract from the seriousness of your material.



### References and Additional Sources

Carmine Gallo, *Talk Like TED: The 9 Public-Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds*, (St. Martin's Press, 2014).

Stephen M. Kosslyn, *Clear and to the Point, 8 Psychological Principles for Compelling PowerPoint Presentations*, (Oxford University Press, 2007).



If you are not using an opening exercise, quiz or video, then just start speaking on the topic without preambles. Do not ask the audience how they are or otherwise poorly imitate a 12-step intervention meeting. Audience members do not want to hear about your travel experiences getting there or how you were thinking about what to say while waiting in the line at Starbucks unless it contains a nexus or teaching point. Get into the topic as quickly and dramatically as possible while maintaining professionalism. You can thank them at the end.

#### **Content: Microsoft PowerPoint**

Like you, I have sat through too many CLEs and presentations that abuse Power Point to the point of amusement — or madness. Presenters squeeze long excerpts from case law onto the screen and then read them aloud while you are simultaneously trying to read them. They use backgrounds that are so colorful and “artistic” that the content is lost or discounted. Speakers repeat phrases or bullet points without context, explanation or elaboration. You get neck pains from flipping your eyes from the screen to the speaker. Fortunately, there are experts who

have studied PowerPoint with an eye to informing us how to use it more effectively.

Professor Stephen Kosslyn, in his 2007 book, *Clear and to the Point*, articulates three objectives that define an effective presentation. Although these should be obvious, it is worthwhile to set them forth as starting points. They are: Connect with your audience, direct and hold attention and promote understanding and memory. I view the last one as the ultimate goal and the first two as the means to achieve the objectives.

Professor Kosslyn articulates eight principles based upon psychology to achieve these objectives:

1. Relevance: Convey neither too much nor too little information.
2. Appropriate knowledge: Communication requires prior knowledge of pertinent concepts, jargon and symbols.
3. Salience: Large, perceptible differences draw attention. Salient stimuli, such as bolding, larger fonts, colors, sounds, highlighting, etc. hijack the audience’s attention.
4. Discriminability: Two properties must differ enough or they will not be distinguishable.

5. Perceptual organization: People automatically group things into units that they then attend to and remember.

6. Compatibility: A message is easiest to understand if its form is compatible with its meaning. Content is inferred from form. Incompatibility causes interference in processing and understanding. For example, make large things large and small things small.

7. Informative changes: Best practices dictate that when meaning changes, appearance changes; no change in meaning, no change in appearance. People expect changes in properties to carry information, so every visible or auditory shift should be intentional and convey information. This means avoiding decorations, shape-shifting and other distractions in an effort to “mix-it-up” to limit boredom. An example would be including a joke or cartoon in the middle of substantive points, which, while funny, does nothing to advance the learning or topic. Every change in meaning should be conveyed by a change in appearance.

8. Capacity Limitations: People have a limited capacity to retain, process and remember a message, so too much information presented too fast or disjointedly may be lost. Professor Kosslyn believes the optimal approach is the Rule of Four, which is to present no more than four groups or topics of information at once, with no more than four subgroups.

Professor Kosslyn provides the following tips for PowerPoint presentations and slides:

#### *Bullets and Numbers*

- Use phrases and bullets, not full sentences, for topic points or specific cases.
- Present a quick overview of the entire list, which should not exceed four bullets per slide, then,
  - Bring phrases or animation in one at a time or highlight them from top to bottom.
  - Keep silent for enough time for the audience to read the bullet.
  - Use no more than two lines per bulleted entry.
  - Use the same bullet symbol for each entry on the slide.

- Use a table of numbers only when specific values are important.

### Color

- Don't vary color for decorative purposes — only for emphasis.
- Use colors that are well-separated in the spectrum.
- Avoid using red and blue or red and green in adjacent regions.
- Make adjacent colors have different lightness.
- Make foregrounds and backgrounds discriminable.
- Use one color for titles and another, less salient one, for text.
- Use warm colors (red, yellow, orange) to define a foreground in front of cooler (green, blue, violet) backgrounds.
- Do not use deep, heavily saturated blue for text or graphics.
- Use color to group elements.

### Animation and Video

- Use animation to direct attention.
- Do not use slow fade-in or fade-out.
- Do not move portions of the same text line or graphic separately: Have them move in or from the same direction.
- Do not require viewers to read moving words.
- Use video clips to illustrate a relevant event.

### Sound

- Use sound to grab audience attention.
- Use sounds sparingly as alerts.
- Use sounds that are appropriate for the topic and point and to define the context.
- Ensure that sound clips are high fidelity and play them through amplification and high-quality speakers.

- Ensure that sound can be heard throughout the room.

### Handouts

I recommend ending with concise summaries, images and bullet point takeaways, with citations to references and additional resources at the end or on a cumulative last page. It may be as simple as a reformatting or reframing of your starting point, the goals and capabilities.

My own view is that case law, statutes, regulations and rules should be summarized as parentheticals. You can include the full quote or case in handouts, narratives or other written materials.

I do not recommend handing out your PowerPoint. Audience members are not going to go through it and they may just appropriate your ideas, images, layout or content. Many conferences now provide all materials and course books in electronic format. ☞

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Know your audience and venue.
- Plan your opening to engage participants.
- Create effective PowerPoint slides and audio-visual aids.
- Deliver teaching points with an awareness of audience attention spans.