By Calvin Sun

To advance and succeed in your career, you need more than just technical skills. You also need to be able to present your ideas clearly and persuasively. Here are some suggestions that may help you in that regard. They assume you are in front of a group, using the ubiquitous PowerPoint and a projector. However, the principles generally apply regardless of your actual type of delivery.

1   Channel your nervousness

You've probably heard of that survey, right? The one that said most people fear public speaking more than they fear dying? Nervousness grips nearly every speaker, regardless of the topic or the size of the audience. In fact, there's probably something wrong with a speaker who fails to experience nervousness. The trick is to avoid having the nervousness paralyze you. Rather, channel it productively, allowing it to energize you and your presentation.

2   Know the material

The best way to control that nervousness is to know your material. All of the other tips in the world are useless if you're unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the material you're presenting. I'll talk later about how you should interact with the slides themselves. For now, I'll just say that the more you know and care about your material, the more effective your presentation will be. If you're talking about a product, how often have you used it -- and what gotchas can you share? In other words, what can you offer beyond what people can Google for themselves?

Knowing the material doesn't mean memorizing a presentation. Audiences will recognize memorization, and it will turn them off.

If you really know your material, you can be free of the lectern and be directly in front of your audience. Your presentation will have more life, and your audience will appreciate it more.

3   Organize the material

Public speakers have an adage:

- Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em.
- Tell 'em.
- Tell 'em what you told 'em.

In other words, a good presentation has an opening, a body, and a conclusion.

The effectiveness of your opening can determine the success of your presentation. You want to capture your audience's attention and draw them into your presentation. For example, when I do my talks on customer service and communications, I ask the audience for examples of times they, as customers, have been annoyed or upset. Other effective openings employ humor (see below), a quotation (a good reference is *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*), or a hypothetical situation to stimulate or even scare the audience. (For example,. "Suppose you arrived at work and the CEO confronted you, saying the data for the entire company was gone. How would you react and how could you prevent such a situation?")

In the body of your presentation, make sure you cover the points you allude to in your opening. Finally, conclude your presentation with a summary of what you said. Make sure your material makes logical sense and that it flows smoothly from one topic to the next.

When preparing your slides, remember the "six-six" rule: A maximum of six words per line and a maximum of six lines per slide.

4 Make contact with the audience

Many guides on presentations advise the speaker to look attendees in the eye. This advice, while well-intentioned, can cause distraction for a speaker. A better technique, I have found, is to look not into their eyes but at the bridges of their nose. When I do so, I'm less likely to be distracted, but it still looks like I'm looking at their eyes.

The worst option is to avoid all eye contact at all. Your talk will fail to connect, and your audience will feel excluded.

5 Consider using a wireless mouse or pointer

I have found the wireless device is the best option for advancing your slides. None of the other alternatives work as well. Moving forward to press the Enter key manually takes time and distracts the audience. Relying on an assistant to do so requires good communications with that person and carries the possibility of a missed cue. Setting timings in the slide show to advance slides automatically limits your spontaneity.

I once delivered a presentation using my wireless mouse and later got a complaint that its red light distracted an attendee. Since then, I've made sure either to cover that light with my hand or else to tape it up.

6 Empty your pockets

Before I deliver a presentation, I clear my pockets of any loose coins and my keys. That way, there's nothing to jingle or otherwise make noise. Just remember to put them back when you're finished.

7 Properly handle questions from the audience

If you take a question from the audience, first repeat it so everyone can hear. Then, thank the questioner and answer the question. Finally, follow up to make sure you answered the question. Repeating the question first helps put your answer into context. Thanking the questioner allows you to gracefully "cut away" from him or her, so that you're talking to the whole audience.

If you sense that the answer will take longer than a few moments, offer to speak with the questioner after the session.

8 Avoid looking at the screen

The audience wants to see your face, not the back or side of your head. Looking at the screen while you're talking breaks eye contact, and makes the audience feel disconnected.

"But wait," you say, "How else can I know what my audience is seeing unless I too look at the screen?" Position equipment in the following sequence: screen / you (the presenter) / laptop computer and LCD projector / audience. Now, set your laptop for dual display, that is, so that images go BOTH to the LCD projector AND to your laptop. With this setup, you no longer need to look at the screen, because you will see the same display on your laptop.

9 Embellish, don't read

My wife teaches English at a local college, and a few years ago I attended an academic conference with her. Looking back at the one session I attended, I would have preferred root canal surgery. Each participant (there were four or five on the panel) handed out his or her paper before the session started. They then proceeded, in sequence, to *read their paper verbatim*.

Don't insult your audience. They can read your slides themselves. What they want is your added value. So when you present, embellish the slides with your own comments and insight. Don't just read the slides yourself.

#10: Use humor effectively

Humor, when used correctly, can break tension for both you and the audience and can help them connect with you. You don't need to be a Rodney Dangerfield. People generally aren't expecting humor, and they aren't expecting a professional stand-up comic, so your chances of making humor work are greater.

A great book that can help in this area is *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Boardroom: Using Humor in Business Speaking*, by Michael Iapoce. He talks about various aspects of humor, how and why humor works, and how a good joke should be structured.

My preferred form of humor is to make fun of myself. Once, I was doing a presentation right before one by Scott Waddle, the former commander of the submarine U.S.S. Greeneville, which struck and sank a Japanese fishing boat in 2001. The first thing I asked the audience was, "Who's looking forward to hearing Commander Waddle?" As expected, the entire room raised their hands. "In other words," I continued, "You can't wait for me to finish."

Calvin Sun works with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications, and leadership. In addition to writing this column, he contributes to TechRepublic's Help Desk Blog. You can contact him at *csun@calvinsun.com*.

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