



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence Lecture Notes

WEEK 8: IMPACT THE AUDIENCE

Hooking and Holding Your Audience

“I’m a writer and a journalist,” said author Becky Blanton in a 2009 TED Talk.¹ “I’m also an insanely curious person, so in 22 years as a journalist, I’ve learned how to do a lot of new things. And three years ago, one of the things I learned to do was to become invisible. I became one of the working homeless.”

Blanton, the author of the book *The Homeless Entrepreneur: How to Start a Business When You’re Homeless, Poor, or Just Plain Broke*, understands that a powerful story is the key to *hooking* an audience. Her strategy, in this case, is to use language that will intrigue the listener, combined with a compelling personal story that immediately secures the audience’s interest. First, she tells the audience that she learned how to become invisible. Then she explains what that invisibility meant: she was homeless.

Merely grabbing your audience’s attention is not enough, however. Just as you need to have a strategy for written communication, you need to have a strategy for individual conversations, for meetings, and for speeches. This strategy is critical to a meaningful, compelling presentation. You must prepare your content and also formulate a plan for the participation of your audience.

Content Preparation and Participation

The first step in preparing your content and formulating your participation strategy is determining just who your audience is. Ask yourself these questions:

- What does your audience know? What doesn’t your audience know?
- How does your audience prefer to receive information?
- How can you best keep your audience engaged throughout the presentation?

As you ask yourself these questions, keep the following points in mind:

➤ **Your presentation must be relevant to your audience**

Give them information in a way that is useful to *them*, not to you. Your goal is to make it easier for your audience to do their jobs, make their decisions, or meet their goals.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/becky_blanton_the_year_i_was_homeless?language=en.



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

➤ **Always over-deliver**

Give the audience more than they expect. For example, if you're supposed to provide an update on the monthly sales numbers, go above and beyond that to incorporate relevant industry trends, competitor information – whatever will take you beyond the basic expectations of your role. *That* is how a leader gets noticed, builds better relationships, and advances in an organization.

➤ **Leave the audience with a *cocktail tidbit***

This means leaving your audience with an interesting, useful fact or story that will make that story more memorable and useful. A great example of this type of tidbit is Jack's *all brains in the game* story, which we've mentioned previously. It's an extremely memorable anecdote that imparts an inspiring and useful lesson.

Adapting to the Unexpected

When you have identified your audience, you must then identify your main points. What do you need from the audience? What will the audience contribute to the discussion? Will you need their buy-in? Will they help you make decisions? You must be flexible. Being well prepared allows you to *roll with the punches* and adapt to changing circumstances during the presentation.

Another essential consideration is how long you have your audience. How long is the presentation? Is the time period variable? Could you be interrupted before the full time allotted has been used? If your time is not guaranteed, or if you learn at the last moment that it has been cut, what is your backup plan? Can you adapt to the change and still accomplish your objectives for the presentation?

When you are well prepared, know your presentation, and can adapt to last-minute changes, you can turn potential liabilities into advantages. This will allow you to accomplish your goals without losing your audience. Otherwise, they will disengage.

Who Should Be Engaged?

Another important aspect of preparation for a presentation is determining who should be engaged in the presentation *before* you deliver it, *while* you are presenting it, and *after* you are done.

- Before you give the presentation, are you sure of others' objectives and expectations? Talk to key figures to refine your presentation.
- Are there key influencers who will be at the presentation whom you can engage *early* to provide a more advantageous outcome? Involving them in your presentation, especially those who might

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JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

become detractors to your message, can give you a tremendous advantage. It makes those detractors feel they are being heard and that they are contributing, which gives you a better chance to align with them while understanding their viewpoints and incorporating their perspectives.

- Whenever possible, lay the groundwork for the participation of other influencers so they will not be caught off guard during the presentation. Surprising key figures whose input or buy-in you require may detract from your presentation. The more prepared they are, the better you will all be able to communicate.

Stats

Think about some recent presentations you have observed. How much do you remember about them? The more the speaker talked, the less you probably retained. Most people have a hard time absorbing and processing large amounts of information unless they are experts on the topic – and even that is difficult.

A mistake many speakers make is taking us on *their* journey. They give us their background, their reasons, and the process they used to reach their conclusions. The audience will lose interest quickly in this type of presentation, no matter how well it supports the case the speaker wants to make.

By contrast, the Becky Blanton TED Talk does not open with Blanton's decision to quit her job and live in her van. Rather, she talks about being invisible, which is a fear most people share. With the audience so engaged, she then gives background, but only as it relates to another shared fear – that of being financially destitute and homeless. Audiences notice and remember items that amaze them, surprise them, or make them curious.

One way to do this is to use dramatic or counterintuitive statistics. For example, consider these two possible openers:

1. The number one predictor of sales volume in stores is not location. It is not how much sales training the staff has had. It is not how much advertising money has been spent. It is the name of the store manager.
2. We were eager to determine the best predictor of sales in our 234 retail locations. We examined 27 possible variables, including the age of the building, type of location (mall, strip center, airport, and kiosk), time in a market, advertising dollars spent, and total sales training hours. The answers surprised us.

Which of those openings, both of which use statistics – facts, figures, etc. – is more compelling? Which one are you likely to remember after you've finished this lecture?



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

Stories

The Blanton TED Talk is, of course, not an example of a statistic, but of a story. Like unusual or counterintuitive statistics, stories are a remarkably good way to engage audiences, as long as those stories are interesting or powerful. Stories help an audience relate personally to the presenter and the presentation.

Once again, consider Jack's "all brains in the game" story. It's at once inspiring and engaging, while also demonstrating vulnerability. Jack is admitting that he made a mistake in not making use of an employee's mind as well as his hands, while relating a powerful lesson that can help every one of us perform better in the business world.

One reason why stories are so compelling is that they are easier to hear, requiring much less processing than some words and sentences that are not immediately and logically sequential. In other words, stories have a *narrative*. This makes them easier to follow. Sales statistics and long lists of company objectives don't have this narrative, so it's much harder to engage an audience with them.

Stories also allow the listener or reader to draw his or her own conclusions and lessons from the story, seeing themselves in the narrative and connecting their own values to it. This is far more powerful and engaging than just accepting a speaker's conclusion.

A great example of this type of engagement is found in many nonprofit organizations. They will use testimonials and success stories to show how an individual or group of individuals has benefitted from the work the organization does. This humanizes the work and is much more memorable than lists of facts and figures.

Adding stories to the facts and figures in our presentations hooks the hearts and minds of our audience. When our message and our anecdotes resonate with them, they will naturally be more engaged. It's also hard to argue with an anecdote. Listing the facts is one thing. Sharing a client's feedback is quite another. Many people will argue facts and figures, but it's much harder to argue with someone else's honest recounting of their experience.

Critically, stories give us a way to bring humor and even surprise to a presentation. They lighten the mood when necessary, or change the pace of the presentation. This breaks up what can be a monotonous recitation of facts and data, especially if these require a lot of concentration from the audience. Open a presentation with, "The sales figures for Q4 are ..." and watch the audience's eyes glaze over. If you instead open with, "Once upon a time," or "It was a dark and stormy night," you'll have them hooked. They'll be curious to know what you'll say next.



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

Grab Them, Keep Them, Leave Them Wanting More

How you hook and hold an audience is critical to how your presentation will be perceived and how it will be *retained*. No matter how important your information, no matter how well researched your presentation, the facts you present and any argument you make will be lost if your presentation is boring. If you cannot grab and maintain the attention of your audience, none of your other efforts will matter. Mastering the art of making gripping presentations is thus essential in positioning yourself – and your company – to *win*.

Supporting Your Presentation Visually

“I have one goal for Q4,” says the CEO. “I intend to ban PowerPoint from all future presentations.”

That CEO is fictional, and the quotation is made up, but how many of you perked up at the mere thought of doing away with this frequently misused tool? In fact, there have been countless newspaper editorials devoted to the ways the business world misuses this tool. We’ve all seen the abuses, from using a single PowerPoint slide in email – when in-line text would have been sufficient – to presentations crowded with useless clip art graphics, to cluttered, jam-packed slides from which the presenter recites like they are reading a script. Supporting your presentation visually is very important. Slides incorporate stats and stories, but there are right ways and wrong ways to employ them.

There are two critical rules for slides:

- Never put too much information on a slide
- Never read from the slide

These rules are frequently broken in the business world. As programs like PowerPoint, Keynote, Prezi, and others have grown in corporate use, they are often used as substitutes for spoken words in presentations. Worse, they are sometimes redundant to the presentation, as the speaker reads from the slides. It’s not unusual for the slide presentation itself to serve as documentation of a given meeting, process, or decision, so the slides contain far too much information that must be read by the speaker and assimilated by the audience.

When a slide contains every single word the speaker says, serving as a kind of teleprompter, the speaker becomes unnecessary to the presentation. There is, quite literally, nothing the speaker says that the listener could not just read independently. Humans do not multi-task well. Seeing a lot of words on the slide, they will attempt to read them, while also listening to and watching the presenter. This splits our cognitive processes across three channels. Nothing will cause an audience to “check out” faster. They will stop engaging, they will stop paying attention, and you will have lost them to their phones or their daydreams.

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JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

Try this for yourself. Watch a television show with the captioning turned on. While watching the show and listening to the audio, you're also trying to read the subtitles. Often, the captions don't exactly match the dialogue because they've been simplified to fit the flow of the program. Even when everything is perfectly synchronized, it's very hard to attend to all of these inputs well. This means, in trying to pay attention to all three of them, you're actually absorbing and processing *none* of them well.

The purpose of a presentation is to influence, persuade, engage, compel thinking, and foster discussion or prompt actions. Visual aids such as slides are just tools to help convey the presenter's core message. They should *supplement* and illustrate the presentation, emphasizing the speaker's words. They must never substitute for the speaker's presentation itself.

Slides should be brief. They should engage and they should persuade. Use your slides to amplify, graphically represent, and expand the audience's understanding of your words. This strengthens your message instead of diffusing it. A relevant bar graph, a photo, an animation, a remarkable stat or story can combine to drive understanding, keep interest high, persuade your audience, and keep that audience engaged.

Brevity

Editing your slides for length is not just a good idea. It is *mandatory*. Just as the sculptor chips away to remove everything that is not the sculpture, what you cut from your slides is as critical as what you leave on them. You may think the audience should be told everything you know about a topic, but you're going to have to whittle that down. Too much information will lose your audience and kill your presentation.

Most business presentations should and can be accomplished in 12 slides or less. Remember that we want the audience to listen to our words, relate to our stories, and be persuaded or compelled by our stats and stories. Even if your individual slides are brief, if you have dozens or scores of them, just clicking through the slides can distract the audience.

When you've pared down your slides to 12 or less, ask yourself if you still have too many. Does every slide add value? Does each slide contain a vital piece of persuasive communication? Are all the slides contributing to your objectives? Anything that is not absolutely necessary should be cut.

Remember that brevity applies to the individual slides, too. You cannot reduce your total number of slides by adding more information to the slides you have. Reducing total slides by overloading them is just as bad as having too many and might even be worse. Recall how important the use of white space is to written communication. Your slides should have the same high "skim value" as your other written messages. The same rules apply.



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

Engagement and Persuasion

Have you been thinking of *presentation* as a TED talk or speech before multiple employees? This definition is incomplete. A presentation is any time you present your compelling case for an idea, a decision, a strategy, or a process. It is any conversation you have with another person whose buy-in, collaboration, or support you need. It could be an individual conversation, a discussion in a meeting with a few colleagues, or, yes, a speech in front of many other people. The only factor that changes is the size of the audience.

Engaging on a personal level, showing humility and vulnerability, listening well, developing empathy, building connections, sharing all perspectives – all of these techniques of effective communication work with our spoken words and our visual aids to support the presentation. Consider applying these principles to your visual aids. You could:

- Ask questions
- Use a quiz or poll at a critical point
- Demonstrate the risks of acting and the risks of not acting
- Quote others whose opinions are relevant – for example, quoting your CEO on the need for quality at the outset of a quality meeting
- Explain how your message and your visual aids support the audience's needs while respecting their time
- Refer to the work and opinions of respected figures in your topic, field, or industry to build credibility – while seeking to get "every brain in the game," you could quote Jack on a slide that bears his picture, for example
- Present contrary views and explain why you have discarded them or why they have less value

As in all written communication, make sure your slides are free of judgment and blame. Do not demean your colleagues, even in the abstract, such as by department. You cannot afford to put any part of your audience on the defensive. This damages the rapport and connection you need to establish with the audience.

Stick to the facts as told by your stats, stories, and graphical representations. Avoid specialized knowledge or jargon unless it is absolutely necessary. Use plain language whenever possible.

Remember, too, that you should try to connect emotionally with your visual aids. When speaking about how children are more candid than adults, for example, you could use a picture of an adorable child. When speaking about challenging business competition, you could display the logos of your chief competitors, with a provocative statistic that explains how your failure to compete will endanger your place in the market. A photo that has emotional appeal can re-engage the audience, if their attention has started to drift.



JWI 505: Business Communications and Executive Presence

Lecture Notes

Keep it Simple ... and Effective

Brevity in communications, focusing on your audience and on the main points of your presentation, allows you to get to the heart of the matter. Don't give the audience a "fire hose" of information. Don't swamp them in data, or your main points will be lost among less relevant – and even irrelevant – facts and figures.

Whether presenting to one person or a hundred, your goal is to share the most important information – both good and bad – in a way that your audience will hear, engage with, and use to make informed, win-win decisions. Persuading while presenting must be done while also honoring, informing, and respecting your audience. You are not trying to *fool* them. You are trying to win their buy-in by informing and convincing them. Effective communication is never coercive or manipulative. It is always collaborative, authentic, and present. And in doing so, it positions your colleagues and your organization to *win*.