

Sales presentations

A presentation is an ideal opportunity to make a sale. You have a captive audience and far more flexibility than in a simple sales letter or phone call. Although many people do not look forward to making a presentation, the right approach can make it an enjoyable and successful experience.

This briefing outlines:

- How to prepare for a presentation.
- How to deliver your presentation.
- How to handle questions.

1 Before you start

1.1 Start by establishing your **objective**.

- Do you simply want to create interest in your product or service or differentiate yourself from competitors?
Do you aim to make a sale?
Or do you want to provide detailed technical information or training?
- If you cannot get in front of the right audience, you may need to change your objective.

1.2 Find out who your **audience** will be and what its needs and expectations are.

- A presentation to a MD might emphasise the business benefits your software will bring. But a presentation to potential users of the product may focus on ease of use, or compatibility with other systems.
- Find out the level of technical knowledge the audience has and tailor your presentation accordingly.

- If you are presenting to an individual, focus on his or her specialist area.

2 Structuring the presentation

2.1 Think of a single **phrase** you would like your audience to use when describing your presentation.

- The phrase should describe the selling point that makes your product or service attractive to this particular customer. For example, 'The guaranteed delivery we provide ensures you meet your customer service standards'.

2.2 Establish a few **key points** the audience must grasp.

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- Make sure the points describe the benefits of your product or service, not the features. For example, 'The guaranteed delivery we provide ensures you meet your customer service standards.'

2.3 Put together a **logical argument** convincing your audience it needs to take action.

- Audiences remember most clearly the opening and closing part of a presentation. Prepare your argument and delivery with care at these points.
- Try organising your material into self-contained sections. This lets you respond readily to cues from the audience. For example, if it seems the customer is not interested in one aspect of your presentation, you can drop this section without disrupting your flow (see **3.3**).

2.4 Find out any **facts** and evidence you need to support your argument.

Home or away

A If you are holding the presentation at **your premises**, prepare the room in advance.

- Check that nobody intends to use the room at the same time.
- If you have a choice, make sure the room is an appropriate size.
- Make sure the room is clean, well lit and a comfortable temperature.
- Prevent any distractions. For example, make sure you will not be disturbed by phone calls or by people entering the room.
- Set up any equipment, such as overhead projectors.
- Ensure that refreshments will be available.
Everything the customer sees on your premises should support the impression you wish to make.

B If you are visiting the **customer's premises**, arrive in plenty of time to check everything is in place.

- Confirm your technical requirements beforehand. For example, are there enough power sockets in the room for your laptop and overhead projector?
- If you are using electrical equipment, plug it in and check that it works. Plan what to do if it fails.

Research the area thoroughly so that you have key information at your fingertips.

- Include important information in your presentation and make sure you will also be able to address any questions or issues the audience might raise.
- Anticipate likely objections to what you are proposing. Make responses to these objections part of your presentation. (See **Selling technique**.)
- Make sure you know the products of your competitors as well as you do your own.

2.5 The structure should allow you to **reinforce** your main themes three times.

- Introduce key points in the overview, develop them in the main body of your presentation and summarise them again in the conclusion (see **5**).

2.6 Confirm in advance how much **time** is available for your presentation and work out your timing.

For example, decide how long you plan to spend answering questions.

- Make your timings flexible. You may need to adjust them if your allocated time changes at the last minute.
- Do not tire your audience out. If the presentation is long, keep people fresh, interested and responsive by inserting regular breaks.

3 Written notes

Written notes should only provide the framework for your presentation. Reading from a script leaves an audience bored and distracted.

3.1 Jot down your **key phrase** and **main points**.

3.2 Prepare a quick **first draft**, using everyday words.

- Read through the draft out loud, listening to yourself.
- Leave the draft overnight and revise it the next day.
- Type up the draft and underline the key points.

3.3 Transfer the key points to individual **cards** and throw away the script.

- Number the cards and think how you might go through them on the day. For example, if you run out of time, you might leave out certain cards marked in advance.

- If you are using visual aids, mark on your cards when you need to use them (see 4).

3.4 Rehearse your presentation until you are happy with it.

- Do this out loud so that you are familiar with the feel of delivering your presentation.
- Record yourself and assess your own performance using a cassette recorder or video camera.
- Get someone experienced to listen and give feedback. Ideally, this should be someone with the same background as your intended audience.
- Check that the delivery time is consistent.

4 Visual impact

4.1 Use visual aids to **reinforce** your message and engage your audience. For example, flipcharts, overhead projectors or PowerPoint presentation software.

- Think about which aids are most appropriate for your presentation.

Handling nerves

Most people feel nervous before making a presentation — but nerves can be a useful source of energy.

A Be clear in your own mind how **valuable** this customer is to you. Focus on your objective for the presentation.

- It helps to remember that customers have chosen to listen to your presentation. Even if they seem unfriendly, they must be interested in your product or service to be there in the first place.

B Prepare well to help you feel in **control**.

- Rehearse in front of family or colleagues.

C Try not to appear **nervous**.

- Take several deep breaths before you start speaking. Hold each one and exhale slowly.
- Concentrate on speaking slowly. People naturally speak fast when they are nervous.
- Have a glass of water nearby to sip if your mouth gets dry.
- Do not hold pieces of paper that magnify your shaking.

- Give meaning to figures by using graphs and diagrams.
- Keep aids simple and relevant.

4.2 Keep **control** of your visual aids and beware of the pitfalls of using them.

- Do not overuse them. People may stop listening to what you are saying.
- Take them down or turn them off when they are not needed so that the audience is not unnecessarily distracted.
- Make sure everyone can see them.
- Talk to the audience, not to the visual aid.

Make sure you are comfortable using the equipment and practise with it beforehand.

5 Delivering the presentation

5.1 Your immediate aim at the start of the presentation is to **involve** the audience and show you have their interests at heart.

- Talk to the customer before the presentation. Find common ground and mention details that show you understand his or her business.
- Introduce yourself. Tell the audience who you are and what you do.
- Break down any 'them and us' divide by asking members of the audience to give you their names and role in the company.
- Find out more about your audience by asking questions. For example, 'Is there anything anyone would particularly like to learn from this presentation?'
- Do not start your presentation until you have everyone's attention.
- If you are confident of a good response, use humour to get the audience on your side.
- Respond to your audience. If people show signs of being bored or distracted, be ready to change your intended approach.
- Use the right body language (see 5.6).

5.2 Start your presentation with an **overview** of the key points you intend to make.

- Tell the audience what you are going to talk about. Summarise what you understand to be the customer's current circumstances and how your product or service is the answer.
- Explain how the presentation is structured, how long it will last and how you intend to deal with questions (see 6).

5.3 Cover each **key point** in turn, following the order you have already outlined.

- Use pauses to emphasise your points.
- Ask questions and use names when appropriate.
- Keep control. For example, do not let people jump ahead. Say 'I'll come to that later.'
- Continually involve the audience and check understanding. If you see doubt, try to clear it up by inviting questions (see 6).

5.4 Summarise what you have said.

- Repeat the message you want the audience to remember.
- Stress the benefits of taking action.

5.5 Use positive **body language** throughout.

- Speak clearly so you can be heard.
- Project energy and confidence. Your enthusiasm is a powerful tool to interest the audience and encourage action.
- Stand confidently and openly. Do not fold your arms, fidget, pace or stand with your hands in your pockets.
- Constantly scan the audience to maintain eye contact.
Smile. Show you are happy to have the chance to present your product or service.

6 Handling questions

You should welcome questions.

They show the audience is interested and paying attention. (See **Selling technique**.)

6.1 Decide in **advance** how you will deal with questions.

- If someone has an objection to what you are saying, it is usually best to respond straight away.
- Handle one question at a time.

6.2 Listen carefully.

- Do not interrupt. If necessary, rephrase the question so it is clear to everyone what has been asked.

6.3 Keep your **answer** simple so the flow of your presentation is not interrupted.

If the question invites a complicated answer, say you will deal with it at the end.

- Direct your answer at the whole audience, not just the person who asked the question.
- Check that whoever asked the question is happy with your response.

6.4 Be prepared to deal with **awkward** questioners who may disrupt the presentation.

- If a question is worded in an aggressive way, do not take it personally. Concentrate on what is being said and keep your objective for the presentation in mind.
- If someone asks a series of difficult questions, say you will deal with each one separately at the end.

6.5 Admit it if you **do not know** the answer. Promise to find it out later.

If there are no questions, be ready to suggest, and answer, your own. For example, 'Many customers ask me how soon we can deliver. In most cases, we can supply goods the next day'.

7 Finishing off

The end of your presentation should be upbeat and decisive.

7.1 Provide any **handouts** the audience may want.

- Handouts are a useful way of making sure your audience can think over the message of your presentation at a later date.
- Avoid giving out handouts any earlier in your presentation. The audience may read them instead of listening to you.

7.2 Get **feedback** from the audience.

- Ask key contacts or decision-makers if they are interested in what they have seen. Get them to tell you why.
This allows them to sell the product to themselves, or gives you the chance to deal with any objections.
- Ask for the chance to demonstrate your product or service in action. For example, with a trial order.

7.3 Establish the **next step** and discuss dates.

- Make a note if you need to get back to the customer to follow up points that have been raised or respond to questions you were unable to answer in the presentation.
- If you see the opportunity, be ready to close the sale (see **Selling technique**).

Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as **Selling technique**.

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