

Excerpt 5

As you may recall from our first 4 Excerpts of The Art and Craft of Presenting we began using the analogy of *The Athlete Presenter* and dividing the process into the following segments:

- **Get organised!**
Identifying target audience, clarifying outcomes, timescales etc.
- **Get ready!**
“Race day” warm-up, visualisation, race tactics and strategies.
- **Get set!**
What to do just before the gun goes
- **Go!**
Opening with a bang and how to deliver your message with a little magic
- **Pacing**
Managing energy and attention during the presentation
- **Finishing**
How to switch on the afterburners so that your message moves on after you finish.
- **Warm-down and stretching**
Making sure there is follow-through on your message and you learn something for the next race.

By excerpt 4 we had reached part of the way into the **Get Ready!** segment looking at some of the unique opportunities offered by live face-to-face presenting such as personalisation, influencing attitudinal change and interactivity. To neglect these is to waste the opportunity and to risk giving presentations a “bad name” by doing dry, one-dimensional “death by PowerPoint”.

So now that we have decided that we are using the right delivery method with the right people for the right reasons we can move on with **Get Ready!**

Assembling all the necessary information and deciding on its’ order and mode of delivery is a good beginning. The most crucial bits of information and messages must have a visual aid attached to them such as a physical prop, a PowerPoint slide or a chart. Examples of physical props are sales aids and samples or representations of objects as a focus for discussion.

The aim is to find a balance in the use of these between helping to manage people’s attention and avoiding overwhelming them. A useful guideline is the use of such a visual every 3 minutes and it is best to alternate between 2 or more different styles of aid.

So, for example, you might have a slide for your opening and preview followed by a physical example that you show and leave on a table, use another slide then go back to the sample. So a physical prop might be re-used several times intermittently. Thus in a 20 minute presentation you might use 5-8 slides and 2-3 props.

Many presenters make the mistake of putting everything they might need to say on slides and therefore in a 20-minute presentation they find they have 10 plus slides. This is the slippery slope to that dreaded terminal disease, "Death by PowerPoint". Certainly a visual aid can assist people to focus their attention and listen, but repetition of the same style of visual aid can actually dull the concentration and some people will become overly dependent on reading the slides instead of listening to the presenter.

So the trick is to use slides only intermittently and only for core messages or themes. They should also be interspersed with other visual aids such as the presenter, objects, sales aids, samples, members of the audience and other attention-grabbing props.

Slides should simply and succinctly support listening, not compete with it. If, for example, there is a slide with a complex graph or one that requires some reading, the professional presenter knows that they must pause, look at the slide themselves and allow 10-20 seconds for the audience to at least orient themselves or read the slide. Then the presenter might ask a question like, "which number on this chart surprises you most?" to engage the audience with the part of the slide that you believe is of most interest. This also allows those who are struggling extra time to digest the slide.

Ideally slides should require little reading, but if they do allow time for people to read rather than competing with their reading by talking. Likewise it is best not to risk patronising the audience by reading the slide to them.

The slide is at most a mini summary of what the presenter says (both verbally and non-verbally). The presenter is always adding value to a brief and visually interesting slide and at least 75% of what is said should not be on a slide. It may be on a supporting handout, but not on the slide.

We are trying to establish and maintain a structured live conversation with our listeners, so we, and they, are the main visual aids in the process. Gestures, movement, posture, energy levels, facial expressions, voice. All of these are far more crucial to the conversation than any slides or other visual aids.

Given that most people are not very good listeners, and that only around 7% of what they take in is verbal, managing their attention for a prolonged period is a tough assignment. We must use the fact that most people take in 60% of their information visually and 33% vocally. So what they are seeing and the sound of the voice they are listening to are enormously influential on the messages they receive.

So, if we think of slides as one of several aids, a useful rule of thumb might be no more than 1-2 every 5 minutes.

The Final phase of **Get Ready!** is to practise your presentation at least three times allowing time for the various interactions and movements you have planned. These practices must be timed and used as an opportunity to “bed down” two or three set pieces.

Set pieces are short monologues about your key points or relevant stories that you want to ensure you can deliver efficiently and with impact. These should be scripted and learnt pretty much verbatim so that you know you can do them “in your sleep”. In a 20-minute presentation you might have 3-5 set pieces including your opening and closing. These form a security blanket for you and give you a general confidence that will carry over into other parts of your presentation.

I like to use the metaphor of a track sprinter who will practice their starts and finishes twice as much as they practise the straight running because they know that the race is won or lost 90% of the time because of a poor start or finish.

The sad fact is that some people only really listen and pay attention at the beginning and the end so if you can give them a punchy, well delivered mini summary of your key message at the beginning and at the end, your presentation may be successful even for those who were mentally absent for the 16 minutes in the middle.

The memory laws of primacy and recency tell us that people remember beginnings and endings best. So again we can use this phenomenon by creating several beginnings and endings in our presentation so that we minimise the forgettable middle. For example, if your content includes 3 key messages under an overall umbrella message, you might design your process to have 3 cycles of preview, present, review (PPR) within a large PPR cycle. This way you give people several opportunities to “get it” and you have several beginnings and endings with very little middle.

These timed practice sessions also enable final editing and any “loose ends” to be identified in time for the real thing. Of course once 2-3 physical practice sessions have happened it becomes easy to mentally rehearse your entire presentation in 1-2 minutes. Such a positive mental visualisation of your presentation unfolding step-by-step is an excellent way to begin the **Get Set!** Stage which we will cover in Excerpt 6 of **The Art and Craft of Presenting**.