

The 10 Worst Presentation Habits

Speakers can be their own worst enemies. Here are our expert's tips on how to make a presentation sing

By Carmine Gallo - *BusinessWeek*

As a communications coach for some of America's most admired companies, I work with business professionals who want to engage their listeners -- whether they are addressing employees, customers or colleagues; whether they are speaking to an audience of one or one thousand. In my book, *10 Simple Secrets of the World's Greatest Business Communicators*, I identify bad presentation habits that impose barriers between speakers and their listeners. Here are the worst habits and how to overcome them.

Gallo is a Pleasanton (Calif.)-based corporate presentation coach and former Emmy-award winning television journalist. He is the author of the new book, 10 Simple Secrets of the World's Greatest Business Communicators. Visit him online at www.carminegallo.com

Bad Habit #1

Reading from notes

Great communicators do not read from scripts, notes, or PowerPoint slides. While it's acceptable to refer to notes from time to time, reading directly from prepared notes is a no-no. It breaks down the rapport between listener and audience.

Do this instead:

Review your material to the point where you have so completely absorbed the material, you can deliver it without notes. *Business Week* recently profiled Apple CEO Steve Jobs, whose magnificent presentations are the result of hours of grueling practice.

Bad Habit #2

Avoiding eye contact

Great communicators understand that eye contact is critical to building trust, credibility, and rapport. Far too many business professionals have a habit of looking at everything but the audience -- a wall, a desk, or a computer.

Do this instead:

Maintain eye contact with your listeners at least 90% of the time. It's appropriate to glance at your notes or slides from time to time, but only for a few seconds and only as a reminder of where to go next. You are speaking for the benefit of your listeners. Speak to them, not the slides.

Bad Habit #3

Uniform

Great communicators look the part. You need to look the part as you are representing Girl Guides. Ensure you are wearing uniform suitable for the subject of your presentation.

For instance:

If doing an outdoor presentation on cooking you are most likely to be wearing a uniform top and jeans. If doing a presentation about a service project at Sangam, your uniform top and badges with navy pants might be more appropriate.

Bad Habit #4

Fidgeting, jiggling, and swaying

Great communicators eliminate small, annoying gestures or mannerisms. Fidgeting with your hands, jiggling coins, or swaying back and forth all reflect nervousness or insecurity. These habits inspire no confidence in the speaker.

Do this instead:

The solution is simple. Don't fidget, jiggle or sway! Videotape your presentations or rehearsals from time to time to catch your flaws.

Bad Habit #5

Failure to rehearse

Great communicators always rehearse important presentations. Most bad presentations are the result of failing to practice talking out loud.

Do this instead:

Take a cue from Cisco CEO John Chambers. He spends hours rehearsing every component of his presentations, from the material to the flow of slides to when and where he's going to walk among the audience. It's preparation to the extreme, but it works.

Bad Habit #6

Standing at attention

Great communicators are not stiff. Standing at attention like a soldier waiting for orders might work for the army, but it makes presentations tedious.

Do this instead:

Move, walk, use hand gestures. Great speakers are animated in voice and body.

Bad Habit #7

Reciting bullet points

Great communicators assume the audience can read. Many speakers read the bullet points on their slides word for word. Slides (or any visual) act as a complement to the speaker, not the other way around.

Do this instead:

Don't write too many words on the slide. A good rule of thumb is no more than four words across and six lines down. For slides with more content, do not recite the slide word for word. Include a story, anecdote, example to add color to the content. Trust that your audience can read the slide for themselves.

Bad Habit #8

Speaking too long

Great communicators know that leadership requires the ability to articulate a message that's passionate, clear, and concise. Studies show that listeners lose their attention after approximately 18 minutes. Many leaders think that the longer they speak, the more important they sound. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Do this instead:

Edit everything you say. Do you spend five minutes saying something that you could otherwise say in 30 seconds? What can you cut out? Be thorough, yet concise in all manners of communication, including phone conversations, emails and formal presentations.

Bad Habit #9

Failing to excite

Great communicators grab their listeners' attention right out of the gate. Audiences remember the first thing you say and the last. But don't worry -- if you're struggling to compose an opening, there is a solution.

Do this instead:

Tell your listeners why they should be excited about your content. Give your audience a reason to care.

Bad Habit #10

Ending with an inspiration deficit

Great communicators end their presentations on an inspiring note. Most presenters believe the middle of their presentation contains the really important content. It might, but most listeners will walk away from a presentation remembering what was said at the end.

Do this instead:

Go ahead and summarize what you just said in the presentation, but leave your audience with one key thought -- something they didn't know that makes their jaws drop in collective awe.