

How can I become a successful presenter?

Friso Coumou, august 2012

Introduction

“You only get it, once you see it” is a famous quote from the dutch soccer player Johan Cruyff. The same goes for giving presentations.

If so, then what is a new way of “seeing presentations”? How can you become a truly successful presenter? In this article I share some of my thoughts on this subject, inspired by the work of Nancy Duarte (2010) and Garr Reynolds (2011).

From slidument to presentation!

The first step down the road to becoming a successful presenter is simply seeing that what passes for a normal presentation is totally out of line with how we learn, understand, remember, and engage. You have to see that what passes as a “good enough” presentation today is actually old school and doesn't belong in the 21th century.

The core idea is simple and profound: we treat presentations as quasi-documents. Reynolds (2011) calls them “sliduments”: slides filled with bullit lists, way too much text and sloppy clip art. Sliduments hinder us to become successful presenters.



Document



Slidument



Presentation

Natural born storytellers

Presentations are not about documents, so we have to say goodbye to the quasi-documents.

Presentations are about storytelling! And humans are “natural born storytellers”. We have to dig deeper into stories. And then enhance our stories by imagery and multimedia. Documentary films and comic books are useful sources of inspirations for that.

Successful presenters amplify the meaning of their words. They tell and show. They connect with their audience, make things clear and more memorable. When they speak, it resonates.....and then there is collective action.

“Yeah”, you say, “I know all about that”.

Now STOP! And think, -really think- about your own presentations. Take a closer look at your own slides and do a little test. Check how much text and bullet lists your slides contain. Are there bullet lists on every slide now and then? More than 6 words per slide? Way more?

I thought so. You construct quasi-documents, not presentations.

But don't worry. It's the usual way of doing things. Seeing this is your first step to improvement.

Why do we create slides?

Why do we create slides in the first place? There are several explanations:

1. Slides are a logical consequence of preparing presentations by sitting behind our computer screens. We focus too much on the presentation content and not enough on the story. We have software tools with “wizards” and “templates” and we simply start to prepare a presentation by filling the slides with text.
2. Slides are expected by the people around us. It's the normal thing. Think about international symposia where speakers have to apply by sending in the handouts of their presentation. Think about symposia that send participants CD-rom's with the handouts of all the presentations of the symposium, as a form of summary of the event. Think about the bosses that are not satisfied with the slides of the employees, “because there's not enough text and information on them”.
3. Slides make us feel safe and comfortable. The text and bullet lists on our slides help us to remember what we want to say.
4. Slides are prepared by subordinates for their bosses. The fact is that a lot of managers in large organisations don't prepare their own presentations. This is also a cause for the lack of personal stories and authenticity in presentations. The slides (and not notes) are used by these workers as a means of communicating the content of the presentation to their bosses.

From the information age to the conceptual age

Slides are an artifact of the information age. In the information age there is a focus on the left side of the brain. The information age has professions in which analytical skills, function, logic and argumentation are highly valued. We're now leaving the information age behind us and we're entering the conceptual age as Daniel Pink (2005) likes to call it. In the conceptual age left brain thinking is a necessary supplement to right brain thinking. The conceptual age is about design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning:



Successful presentations are an artifact of the conceptual age. Successful presenters in the conceptual age tell stories and trigger emotions with their pictures. The slides of successful presenters are useless without the presenters (this is a second test you can perform on your current slides: can I understand all of them without the story being told? No? You're fine!). Their slides look clean, simple and coherent and contain professional images. That is because excellent presenters use slides only to reinforce their stories.



The slides of Bill Gates show how he has developed from a "sliduementer" (2007, left side) to a "presenter" (2010, right side).

To help you becoming an excellent presenter, one of the best things you can do is to create a document that you can leave behind as a handout (Reynolds, 2011). Tell people in advance you are handing out your article containing all the information, so they don't have to write during your presentation. This way your handouts set your audience free. Handouts also set yourself free as a presenter: you don't have to cover everything. You can focus on your core messages and you don't have to be complete: the details can be found in your paper.

In the complex times of the conceptual age people long for clarity, brevity and simplicity. Your greatness is in what you leave out of the presentation, not in all the stuff you put in it. Reynolds (2012) calls this the ZEN-approach of presentations:

- 1) restraint in preparation.
- 2) simplicity in design
- 2) naturalness in delivery.

In the following sections I take a closer look at each of these three phases.

1) PREPARATION.

How do I prepare a successful presentation?

Here's a thing to remember: *Be the SUCCESS!*



B SUCCESS is an acronym for the activities you carry out in the preparation phase:

Brainstorm. Simple. Unexpected. Concrete. Credible. Emotional. Story. Structure.

*** B rainstorm**

Every presentation starts with a brainstorm. Reynolds (2011) advises to do this 'analog', preferably with pen and paper, just to let creativity flow. When you have mind-mapped several subjects, and all the facts, stories, examples etc. around them, you have to discover the underlying themes or core categories. Then you have to decide what your core message and supporting messages are. What is the big picture?

Then what? Use SUCCESS in your messages to let them stick (Heath & Heath, 2008)! Brainstorm on! And make your messages Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional, and use Story. And then, as a final step, add Structure.

*** S imple: What is the core message? Why does it matter?**

Brainstorm:

1. What is my core message?

What is the essence? If the audience will remember only one thing, what do I want it to be?

2. Why does it matter?

From the perspective of the audience, answer the question: So what?! Why should we care? Why does it matter?

Simon Sinek (2011) gives further guidance on asking "Why?".

You can find out if you have successfully made your're message simple by doing the elevator test: can you sell your message in 30-45 seconds?

*** U nexpected: Pose questions: open holes in peoples knowledge and fill them.**

Take your audience on a journey.

Brainstorm: what questions can I pose?

*** Concrete: Use natural speech, give real life examples.**

Brainstorm: which examples can I give?

*** Credible: Use statistics and quotes.**

Brainstorm: what statistics and quotes can I use?

*** Emotional: Make them feel things. Use images and objects.**

Brainstorm:

1. What emotions do I want to arouse?
2. What images and objects can I use to arouse these emotions?

*** Story: Tell stories, use analogies and metaphors.**

Brainstorm: which stories, analogies and metaphors can I use?

*** Structure**

In the previous phase you have collected statistics, quotes and several “mini stories”. Now you have to structure this in a master narrative. The presentation in itself is “the master story”. You can structure your presentation, using the following steps:

- **Group and identify core message, and (3) supporting messages**
- **Analog storyboarding**

Lay post-its out in sequence, or print out blank slides (12 slides per page). You now have our core message, and 3 supporting messages with data, mini stories, quotes, facts etc.

- **Basic framework: the “master story of your presentation”:**

Problem

Introduce the pain and the core message & why it is important for your audience.

Causes of the problem

How and why you solved the problem.

Use the three supporting-message sections to support core message and solve the pain.

Call to action: what your audience can and should do

- **Sketch your visuals**
- **Digital storyboarding: delete all the things that do not support core message.**

2) DESIGN.

How do I design a successful presentation?

Here a thing to remember: *Serve with simplicity!*



Serve your audience...

Design is about the end user. Design is about creating solutions that help or improve the lives of other people. Designers must be aware of the end user and how best to solve (or prevent) a problem from the user's point of view. While designing your presentation, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is my audience?
- What is their background?
- What do they expect of me?
- Why was I asked to speak?
- What do I want them to do? (call to action)
- How much time do I have?
- What's the venue like?
- What visual medium is most appropriate for this particular situation and audience?

You can further analyze and understand your audience by using the method of Empathy Mapping (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010).

...with Simplicity

Design is about restraint and the essence of an issue, about clarity. The best visuals are simple. Albert Einstein once said “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Simplicity is not about dumbing down your presentation. It's about restraint: you have to include only what is necessary to communicate the particular message for the particular audience. There can only be one core message, so you have to prioritize! Eliminate the nonessential! Reynolds (2011) calls this “amplification through simplification”.

Next to serving simplicity in content, you have to serve simplicity in form. Create simple and highly visual slides. Consider the use of empty space in your slides. Empty space can convey a feeling of high quality, sophistication, and importance.

3) DELIVERY.

How do I deliver a successful presentation?

Here's a thing to remember: Deliver with PUNCHES!



PUNCHES is an acronym for: Personal. Unexpected. Novel. Challenging. Humorous. Engagement and Showmastery.

- * **P**ersonal story
- * **U**nexpected statement or behaviour
- * **N**ovel image, study or statistic
- * **C**hallenging and thought provoking questions
- * **H**umorous story
- * **E**ngagement
- * **S**howmastery

Engagement and show-mastery is about emotion. Successful presenters tap into the emotions of the audience and get them involved on a personal level. You have to look, move and sound as a showmaster. Dress different and a little better than your audience. Move with purpose. Stand natural and face your audience! Make eye contact, and use an energetic voice.

True showmasters are able to bridge the distance between themselves and their audience. They make connections with the audience. Something magic happens when both the presenter and the audience are fully in the moment. They have a special shared experience that resonates and changes the world for the better.

Summary

So to answer the question “How can I become a successful presenter?”, you only have to remember three things:



B the SUCCESS!

Brainstorm. Simple. Unexpected. Concrete. Credible. Emotional. Story. Structure.

Serve with SIMPLICITY!

Simple content and simple form for your audience.

Deliver the PUNCHES!

Personal. Unexpected. Novel. Challenging. Humorous. Engagement. Showmaster.

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