



improve

Applied Insights from the HOK University

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTING

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CONVINCING, INSPIRING, AND GAINING APPROVAL

Despite perfect slides and rehearsed gestures, the impact of many presentations fizzles out. Why? Because focusing on technical presentation details, formal design, and contrived body language fails to convince. The key lies in an authentic demeanor, substantive content, and positive body language. Or in other words, through genuine presence. Only in this way can enthusiasm be sparked and final approval for a topic be secured.

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I. APPROVAL IS THE GOAL OF EVERY PRESENTATION

“One genius decision a day keeps the work away?” - The image of executives who make a few decisions to set major strategic courses and then toast their stroke of genius on the golf course has little to do with reality. Rather, the day-to-day work of decision-makers takes place in endless marathon meetings, where a constant flood of urgent questions and problems is discussed nonstop¹. These sessions are typically based on presentations designed to promote the initiation and implementation of the best ideas, initiatives, and projects.

Sometimes the goal is simply to inform or entertain. However, in a business context, the ultimate challenge is to gain and secure approval for a strategic plan or project. Despite an awareness of the paramount importance of good presentations and knowledge of the relevant techniques, a large proportion of presentations, even at the highest levels, fall short of their potential: the delivery is lackluster, the content remains bland, the spark doesn't ignite, and the impact fizzles out. What could be the reason for this?

The presentation paradox is this: a lot of technique, but little impact.

The problem is well known everywhere, but people react to it in the wrong way. On Amazon alone, a search for “presentation technique” currently yields over 10,000 results. In addition, there are countless websites and platforms offering tips and tricks for better presentations, as well as a flood of videos on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. They all promise to optimize every performance with more or less creative techniques and checklists. From the right length of pauses, avoiding filler words like

¹ Porter, M. / Nohria, N., “How Managers Plan Their Day,” in: Harvard Business Manager 09/2018, p. 18 ff.



“um”, perfect head, arm, and hand posture, the optimal use of your standing and supporting legs, all the way to the ultimate slide design.

Instead of improving the presentation, the meticulous adherence to all these techniques and the forced avoidance of mistakes paradoxically lead to presenters appearing increasingly tense and losing sight of their actual goal - gaining approval for an idea. The result is that the central message fails to resonate with the audience or target group, attention wanes, and the ensuing discussions become tedious. And even worse: The initiative is launched only half-heartedly - out of a lack of alternatives rather than conviction - or disappears into a drawer altogether.

2. THE THREE-PART FOCUS IS: ENTHUSIASM, CONTENT, TECHNIQUE

Ultimately, placing immediate focus on technical presentation details is like putting the cart before the horse. In our view, it is not the first but the last step toward a compelling performance (see Fig. 1). Focus 1 should instead be on feeling your own enthusiasm for the idea being presented and the desire to convey that enthusiasm. “Enthusiastic” literally means “to fill with spirit,” that is, to convey one’s own emotions and passions to others. With Focus 2, confidence and credibility are generated through content expertise and a well-structured presentation. The foundation for this lies in a coherent concept that is presented. Focus 3, as the final step, then emphasizes the technically flawless preparation of the actual presentation. Accordingly, enthusiasm for the idea can easily compensate for poor slide design, but in the case of an uninspired presentation, even the correct font size can’t save the day.

Fig. 1: The Three-Part Focus of a Professional Presentation

Focus	Impact	Goal
1. Enthusiasm	Presence and relationship-building	Feel enthusiasm for your own idea and allow yourself to enjoy sharing it
2. Content	Confidence and credibility	Anchor thorough preparation of the content with a coherent concept
3. Technique	Professionalism and clarity	Finally, optimize the impact with technical presentation details

Focus 1: The power of enthusiasm sparks engagement.

The key to a compelling presentation lies not in technical details, but in conveying the content in an engaging way. Actors train for years to control every detail of their body language. That’s not possible, nor is it necessary, in a business context. For us, it’s simply important to internalize that we’re not just convinced of our concept - we’re enthusiastic about it - and that we finally get to present it. When we actively feel this strong positive emotion during the presentation, we won’t be able to help but exude all the small nuances that make up a motivated presence. Examples include a firm handshake as a greeting, a radiant facial expression with sparkling eyes or a winning smile, dynamic body tension, active body language that faces the audience, and a lively voice with perfect modulation. This is exactly what actors mean by stage presence: they



use it to command the room, draw attention to themselves, and build a connection with the audience. And last, but not least, they manage to evoke an equally enthusiastic response from the audience.

At its core, a presentation is about building motivating relationships.

Science proves that the spark can literally jump across. Research on emotional contagion shows that emotions can be directly transmitted to the audience². A kind of chain reaction ensues, spreading in waves and emotionally sweeping the audience along. For presentations, it's important to remember that only when we, as presenters, are truly passionate about the topic and don't hold back there is a chance that this emotion and energy will spread to the audience. This applies just as much to top-management presentations as it does to project pitches or academic lectures.

Focus 2: The perfect concept structures the content.

Enthusiasm is not blind excitement. Rather, it gains a confident depth through professionalism. A thorough understanding of the topic and a competent foundation for the idea create the impression that we have everything under control. This increases both credibility and trust. Since every proposal concerns the future - and the future is unpredictable, especially in the age of AI and multiple crises - there are no concepts that are 100% right or wrong. What does exist are well-developed and poorly developed ideas. The evaluation criteria are therefore the logical rigor and plausibility with which a path from the problem to the solution is demonstrated (see Fig. 2). If all these steps follow a logical and comprehensible sequence - that is, if one point builds upon the next - the famous "common thread" becomes apparent, and the entire concept is consistent and plausible.

Fig. 2: Building Blocks of a Concept

1. Problem	Why is it worth taking action?
2. Cause	What is the root cause of the problem?
3. Objective	What do we want to achieve in the future?
4. Strategy	How do we plan to achieve this future?
5. Implementation	What measures will be taken to achieve this?
6. Resources	What resources are needed for this?
7. Evaluation	How will the implementation be evaluated?

² Herrando, C. / Constantinides, E. (2021). Emotional Contagion: A Brief Overview and Future Directions. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 712606. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.712606>



Focus 3: Polishing the presentation techniques rounds everything off.

With an awareness of enthusiasm (Focus 1) and a clear, common thread (Focus 2), we can now prepare the technical details of your presentation (Focus 3). There are countless tips and tricks³ that we've summarized into the most important principles (Fig. 3). Those who pay attention to and incorporate these can gain decisive advantages in the competition for approval.

Fig. 3: Presentation Principles	
1. KISS	KISS – Keep it short & simple: The presentation should be as short as possible and only as long as necessary - but never longer than planned.
2. Storytelling	Vivid anecdotes, specific people and quotes capture attention and are more memorable.
3. Dramaturgy	The problem should be dramatized, placed in a broader context, and argued step by step toward a solution.
4. Argumentation	Sources, analyses, best practices... should be presented transparently to build credibility for the solution.
5. Slide Design	Presentations should follow the corporate design guidelines or feature a custom design - clear, easy to read, and error-free.
6. Headings	Headings should be "captivating," e.g., engaging, emotionally compelling, summarizing, forward-looking, etc.
7. Activation	From the very beginning, a tangible connection with the audience should be established: show interest, ask questions, etc.
8. Benefits	It's always a good idea to communicate the specific benefits for the organization, employees, and leaders.
9. Focus on Results	The presentation focuses on relevant content and results; the creative process behind them remains in the background.
10. Start and End	The presentation is delivered off the cuff; only the opening and closing are carefully prepared and rehearsed.
11. Handout	The most important information is summarized concisely and clearly, serving as a sort of "business card."
12. Time Buffer	Arriving on time allows for stress-free preparation, a technical check, and the opportunity for small talk to build rapport.

³ Lauff, W., Toolbox: Writing, Speaking, Moderating, and Presenting Perfectly, Stuttgart 2023, pp. 187 ff.



3. AFTER THE PRESENTATION IS BEFORE IMPLEMENTATION

Every presentation can be divided into three phases: preparation, the presentation itself, and follow-up. Even if we find out in the evening that a presentation is scheduled for the next morning, that still leaves enough time to prepare the perfect presentation. First, Focus 1: What excites me about my idea, and why should it excite my audience as well? Followed by Focus 2: How can I present a plausible argument for the idea, from the problem to the solution? And finally, Focus 3: What presentation techniques will I use to fine-tune the delivery? Using the "Presentation Canvas" tool (see Fig. 4), you can design a presentation systematically, pragmatically, and quickly.

Presenting is preparing for implementation.

Even outstanding presentations do not end with the last slide. They provide impetus and initiate change. Once approval has been granted, the implementation phase begins. Anyone who has demonstrated commitment, reliability, and enthusiasm during the presentation should prove it immediately - for example, by honoring agreements, promptly submitting documents or immediately following up on ideas developed during the discussion. This builds trust that has an impact far beyond the presentation itself. After all, "Action speaks louder than words."

Anyone wondering whether too much enthusiasm might also be counterproductive is certainly right. There is definitely a risk of giving the impression of overconfidence, an inability to be self-critical, or even arrogance. However, our experience shows that this is the exception. The norm tends to be restraint, timidity, and a lack of presence, which is why we can confidently offer this advice: from now on, consciously and vigorously turn up the enthusiasm!



Summary: Application and Benefits

1. Guidance and best practices for designing and delivering presentations
2. A pragmatic focus on enthusiasm, content, and presentation techniques
3. Ideas for the continuous improvement of presentations (yourself, your area of responsibility, the company)



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Fig. 4: Presentation Canvas: Tool and Example (Sales Manager)

The sales manager of a European mechanical engineering company is using the Presentation Canvas to prepare for an executive board meeting regarding market penetration in Latin America.

Part A: Motivation for Enthusiasm

1. My Motivation	• Key topics for sales in the coming years: strategic direction, personnel development, etc. • Key personal goal for my future career path • ...
2. What Inspires My Target Audience	• Recognition of the need to increase market share in Latin America (to offset the challenges in the Chinese market) • ...

Part B: Building Blocks of a Concept

1. Problem	• Crisis scenario if market and sales activities remain unchanged • Analysis of the consequences for market position, profitability, liquidity...
2. Cause	• Description of the dramatic developments in the Chinese market • Highlighting additional changes in business models (AI...)
3. Objective	• Detailed market position goals for the most important markets (Brazil, Mexico...) • ...
4. Strategy	• ...
5. Implementation	• ...
6. Resources	• ...
7. Evaluation	• ...

Part C: Presentation Principles

1. KISS	• A maximum of ten concise PowerPoint slides • Explanatory appendix as a backup (analyses...)
2. Storytelling	• Quotes from customers, suppliers, executives... • Short video of Chinese customers from the trade show in Shenzhen
3. Dramaturgy	• Identifying the positive and negative consequences for the company • ...
4. Argumentation	• ...
5. Slide Design	• ...
6. Headings	• ...
7. Activation	• ...
8. Benefits	• ...
9. Focus on Results	• ...
10. Start and End	• ...
11. Handout	• ...
12. Time buffer	• ...