7
ways to make a positive impact when presenting virtually

If there is one skill that is essential for getting your message across in the current environment, it is the ability to hold your audience with a great online presentation.

The ability to deliver an engaging presentation remains highly valued

The number of webinars, video conferences and virtual meetings, which was already significant, has increased dramatically as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. These will continue to be used extensively going forward. One way to stand out amongst all of the online 'noise' is the ability to deliver a great online presentation.

Our Go-To Professional research indicates that the ability to deliver a powerful presentation is highly valued. As one senior professional told us: "To be able to give a decent online presentation on a technical subject, you really have to understand your material. It's a great discipline."

Another added "I've had many recent work instructions come off the back of webinars I've delivered. I have never had the same return on articles I have written. If there is one skill that is essential for raising your profile, it is the ability to pull together a presentation and deliver it with confidence."

So what are the secrets of creating a powerful and engaging online presentation? In this Winning Business Digest we share seven of them.

This is one of The Results Consultancy's Winning Business Digest series which gives practical tips on a range of business development topics

7 ways to make a positive impact when presenting virtually

1 Don't forget the basics

At the end of the day, an online presentation is still a presentation. So, don't forget the fundamental questions of *Who*, *Why*, *What* and *How*. It is a good tip to start the planning for each presentation with a blank sheet of paper. Many presentations will fail to engage because they come across as too generic.

So consider… *Who* is the audience and what is the context, their level of understanding, and a good outcome for them? *Why* are you doing this – what is the point, given that there will be various competing demands on their and your time? Think about the *What* in terms of the content, and the *How* in terms of the way you deliver it.

> **Try this:** *When planning your presentation, really focus on the audience and the purpose. Ask yourself the key questions of what would make a successful presentation from their perspective as well as yours. Having a clear understanding of the audience will enable you to structure your presentation and deliver in the most appropriate way, taking into account style, degree of formality and any relevant cultural issues.*

2 Be clear about your key messages

We are big fans of the mantra 'less is more'. Many presentations fail to engage their online audience because the key messages are not clear, or there are simply too many of them to take on board. Limit yourself to the key messages you want the audience to understand and take away. Many argue that people can only really retain three key points.

Decide in your mind what you want the audience to do as a result of your presentation, as that will influence the structure and content you create. Think about the key issues on your audience's mind and how you can help them.

Keeping it simple is a good tip and you will certainly impress an audience if you can boil an argument down to its bare essentials and convey the essence of a concept in plain language. Also remember to structure the presentation so the call to action or 'hook' isn't just buried towards the end.

> **Try this:** *When developing your presentation build it around this rough structure to ensure it has a clear and logical flow:*
>
> *1. Briefly introduce and signpost the topic/issue you will be covering and the key message(s)*
>
> *2. Explain the topic/issue in more depth*
>
> *3. Summarise by re-emphasising the key message(s) and point to the next steps/ further action for your audience to take*
>
> *Help your online audience to absorb and retain the key messages you want them to take away. Some of the most notable presentations are remembered, not because of the density of their content, but by the breathing spaces they incorporated.*

3 Familiarise yourself with the technology

There is nothing more stressful for a presenter of a webinar, or a leader of an online meeting, to be unsure of the underlying technology and how it all works. Almost everyone has been in a virtual audience when a failure of the technology, or a failure of the presenter to use it properly, has prompted them to disconnect.

The vital rule for any presenter is to practise so that you know how the underlying technology works. And these days, it's not just about knowing one system. Zoom, WebEx, GoToMeeting, Skype, BlueJeans and Microsoft Teams, just to mention a few, all have similar functionality but are all different in the way they operate. The time to find this out is in your rehearsal, not during your live presentation!

The reason we say this is that audiences draw conclusions on your competence as a professional, not just from your knowledge of the subject matter you are discussing, but also from your ability to be 'in control'.

Avoiding the flustered comments we've heard such as 'I don't know what's happened there', or 'can you see my screen?' relies on the presenter knowing how to 'drive' the presentation technology and take action in the moment, in a calm way. Waiting for the technical expert to arrive is usually not possible or desirable.

We cannot control broadband usage of others, but make sure you are close to a router if presenting from home or even have a wired connection to connect your laptop to the internet. Make sure that other devices are switched off to give you as much local bandwidth as possible.

> **Try this:** *Familiarise yourself with the technology you are going to use for THIS online presentation, so that you avoid the obvious pitfalls and are not learning on the job as you deliver your session. If you have the choice, select the platform that you are most familiar with. This will give you comfort and confidence.*
>
> *If you have to use a different platform (e.g. you are one of several speakers, and using another organisation's system) build in time for a dry run so that you know how to press the right buttons at the right time.*
>
> *Start at the absolute basics – does your firm's IT system and firewall allow that particular presentation platform to be used? Do you know how to log in and have you been given the right password?*

4 Practise and get the environment right

As you would for any presentation, you have to practise and practise again. Presenters relying on notes, or too heavily on their slides, is hardly a way to inspire confidence. When presenting online, this can be even more obvious as presenters break eye contact.

To start with, you might wish to write out some of your key points but do not rely on a script. As you practise, and that includes speaking the words out loud, the flow will develop and you will be aware of phrases which may trip you up or words which may be repetitive. Try and get some feedback to help you come across as natural and confident in your delivery.

Practise in front of the camera, in addition to doing a technical rehearsal to test the platform you are using. Find a quiet and well-lit space with an uncluttered background. Try and raise your laptop or webcam so it is close to your horizontal eye line to avoid slouching.

> **Try this:** *Practise out loud to fine tune your delivery and make sure that your key messages land. Remember not to speak too quickly in the rehearsal as well as the actual presentation and use pauses to help you get your messages across. Be aware of the key words you need to emphasise and how to modulate your tone. This is particularly important when you are not visible to an audience.*

5 Manage your energy levels

For many people, it can be a lot easier to get their energy from a live audience in the same venue rather than a virtual situation. We also need to make sure we make a positive impact on the small screen. Try and get in the 'zone' before your presentation with some warm-up techniques and get the right energy from the start.

Carry Clubb who leads Actors in Industry has some great tips in this area, including thinking of ways to measure energy on a scale of 1-10, or low to high. Carry has a great expression of "Switch on at 7" to have that initial positive impact.

We also need to be aware of the danger of energy levels slipping. We can convey positive energy from our body language, eye contact, facial expression, hand gestures and voice. When done well, hand gestures will help convey openness and trustworthiness.

> **Try this:** *Use your voice, facial expressions and body language to convey energy. Some warm up exercises beforehand can help, of course. Be aware of your own style and try and make sure that you use hand gestures in an appropriate way to reinforce key points and convey credibility.*

ENERGY

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1                    10
LOWEST          HIGHEST
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6 Make it engaging

Think about your audience's energy and their attention span. It is a lot harder to maintain that attention on a virtual presentation than in a real face-to-face environment. Think about how you can connect with your audience with an understanding of their situation and some empathy. Make your audience think.

For internal or certain client briefings it may be useful to send round update information in advance, so the discussion is spent focusing forward. Encouraging questions throughout is an obvious way to encourage interaction although the presenter/ facilitator still needs to maintain a level of control.

What engagement devices can you bring to bear? A good opening helps, of course. Could that be a compelling statistic, a story, an analogy, a question, a hypothetical situation or a quote rather than just running through an agenda? A theme can be useful and one you can keep bringing the audience back to. Key facts, statistics, stories, props, demonstrations and strong visuals can also be part of the toolkit, of course. Photos, models and videos can be extremely helpful.

Many people will be using things such as online polls or virtual break-out rooms if the session lends itself to small group discussions at some point. One thing to bear in mind is whether all engagement devices add to the overall presentation to avoid using things for the sake of it and appearing 'gimmicky'.

People tend to stuff presentations full of detail endeavouring to give the audience everything they need, or may have questions about. In contrast it is better to hold a little back. One thing our multi-channel and busy world has achieved is to make attention spans even shorter.

> **Try this:** *Think about what will support your key messages. Attention span will normally be shorter during an online presentation. Stories and case studies are especially helpful in terms of bringing situations to life, and demonstrating your capabilities. Where have similar challenges happened before and how did you deal with them? Stories tend to be a lot more memorable than just facts.*
>
> *In live face to face presentations, the presenter gets immediate feedback from their audience, but in virtual presentations there is none of that. It is the presenter's responsibility to create content that is likely to be engaging from the outset.*

7 Think about the next step

The planning process will help you think about the point of your presentation and what you want your audience to do as a result of attending. In fact, a 'call to action' is a great way to ensure there is some sort of follow up.

For some presentations, particularly those which are designed to impart information to a wide audience, the follow up might be as simple as making materials and contact information available as well as a recording of the session. There are many more proactive things which can be done, of course, such as a one to one follow up or asking participants to share particular goals or targets in internal sessions.

Whilst we may feel the key points and calls to action in our presentation are clear to us, our audience may not be so sure – and it is hard to assess this remotely. It is important then to select a next step which is easy for them to take and to make it very clear. Re-emphasise this step in your summary so they're left with the call to action fresh in their mind.

Try this: *Devise a next step which gives help, insight or guidance to a common issue or challenge your audience may be facing. Make it easy for them to undertake, for example sending a quick email, giving a call, downloading a guide etc. so they can fit it easily into their schedules.*

Take a proactive stance and build hooks into your presentation that create a chance for further dialogue with those who have attended.

Summary

Powerful online presentations invariably come from clarity and the ability to get a message across in plain language that an audience understands. The presenter needs to have a good understanding of his/her audience and empathise with them in order to harness their interest and engagement.

They also need to think more broadly, not just about the content of their presentation, but also the overall experience they're hoping to create. What do they want the audience to think, feel and do after the virtual sessions?

For business presentations there will be a goal that all the effort will lead to something. Building in attractive and easy to follow next steps, and guiding an audience to them, will ensure the effort in preparing and delivering the presentation brings the results intended.

This **Winning Business Digest** has been written by **John Timperley** & **Andrew Warren**.
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