Executive Development
(R123)

A Primer on Making Presentations

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Introduction

Some Common Complaints About Presentations

- The presentation title didn't describe the presentation content.

- The presenter seemed unprepared and disorganized.

- I couldn't hear the presentation.

- I couldn't see the visuals.

- The presenter just read from the visuals.

- The presentation was dull and didn't get to the point.

- There were no handouts, or the handouts ran out.

- There was no opportunity for audience participation.

You Can Avoid These Problems!

As a fire service leader, you will often make presentations to both internal and external groups. Your presentations don't need to engender comments like these! And you don't need to be the world's greatest orator to avoid them, either. Anyone can make an effective presentation by paying attention to some critical steps.

The purpose of this primer is to provide you with practical suggestions to help you to make presentations that are interesting and are effective in conveying your important ideas to your audience.

The Seven-Step Approach to Successful Presentations

Step 1: Define your purpose.

The purpose of any presentation is to communicate information that your audience can use. Ask yourself:

Why do I want to talk about this topic?
Why do I want to talk about this topic at this time to this audience:

- To give them information to act on?
- To motivate them to act?

In 25 words or less, what do I want the audience to do with the information I present?

Step 2: Tailor your presentation to your audience.

Before you begin developing your presentation, identify your audience. Will it be a highly educated audience, or an audience of high school graduates? Will English be their first language? Do they already know something about the topic?

Your presentation should include neither data that is too elementary for a knowledgeable audience, nor data that is too technical for an audience unfamiliar with your topic. Your language and terminology should make the audience "connect" with you and feel that they can learn something useful to them.

For example, the audience for your presentations in the NFA courses will be composed of your peers--fire professionals with extensive knowledge of the fire service. They will represent a range of experience, and have unique perspectives, based their geographic location, and the types of roles they have filled. Most students will have academic degrees, and some will have advanced degrees. Nearly all will have successfully completed other NFA courses. They will expect your presentation to provide new information that they can use.

If you are making a presentation to an audience of people outside the Fire Service, you will need to do some homework. Find out who has been invited to your presentation. Are they decision makers?

Technical experts? Architects? Engineers? Community leaders? A combination of some or all of these?

Check your files and talk with your colleagues and the person who invited you to find out how this audience has responded to similar presentations by fire service personnel in the past. What is likely to be their reason for attending your presentation? Have the issues you plan to discuss been discussed previously in the community or in the media? What has been the reaction? What has the audience wanted to know about your topic? This information will help you to tie your presentation to the interests of your audience, anticipate their questions, and prepare responses.

If you will be presenting findings that may be unwelcome, talk them over in advance with the person who invited you. They can tell you if you need to discuss your presentation ahead of time with specific individuals. You want to avoid disagreeable surprises if you can.

Remember that your presentation must be free of biased or sexist language. Check Chapter 3 of the *APA Publication Manual* if you have any doubt about how to use terms related to gender, age, handicapping conditions, or racial or ethnic identity. Be sure that your visuals are also bias-free.

Step 3: Outline the Presentation Content

You don't need to write out every word, but you should write a detailed outline. Underline any terms that may be unfamiliar to your audience and include in your outline an explanation of those terms.

Organize your outline in a logical sequence to fill the time available—major point, followed by supporting minor points.

Develop an introduction to your presentation that captures audience attention, describes the purpose of the presentation, and establishes your credibility to present on the topic. But don't include your entire resume. That will bore your audience. If your presentation is good, your credibility will emerge through it.

Develop a brief overview of your presentation. Then develop your major points, in logical order. Introduce each point, discuss it, and then summarize it. Plan to use active voice in your presentation and

use wording that emphasizes the key points that you want the audience to remember.

If you are presenting findings that will be both good and bad news to your audience, plan to present the bad news first.

In your conclusion, plan to reiterate your presentation purpose and your key points, thank the audience for their attention, and remind them of how to contact you later.

Format

Vary your format. Most adults do not enjoy being lectured at. Try to build in audience participation through group exercises, discussion, etc. If the audience can see how they can use the information you are presenting, you will have their attention!

Decide how you want to interact with the audience. If you are presenting before a small group, it is easier to provide opportunities for audience participation. If the group is large, you should still provide an opportunity for questions and answers. Decide whether you will take questions throughout your presentation, or ask the audience to hold their questions until you finish.

Plan your visuals

As you develop your presentation outline, mark the points where you want to use visuals, and underline words you want to put on your visuals. Make a note of graphics and illustrations that will reinforce your points. Remember, visuals should be talking points, not the text of a lecture!

Plan your Handouts

Decide at what point you want to distribute your handouts. Do you want the audience to use them to follow your presentation? If so, note on your presentation outline the places where you will refer to them. You may want to distribute the handouts at the end of your presentation, so that the audience will not be trying to follow them while you are talking. In this case, your outline should remind you to tell the audience that you will give out notes from the presentation later. Otherwise, the audience will be distracted by trying to take notes while you talk.

If possible, find out whether presenters to this audience usually distribute their handouts at the start of their presentations. If so, the audience will expect them, and you should do this, too.

Step 4: Develop Your Presentation Materials

Handouts

Handouts should be carefully designed and must respect copyright regulations. Make enough handouts for everyone in the audience. Limit the page length so that the audience will not be intimated by the amount of reading required. Provide a reference list for more in-depth exploration of your topic.

Your handouts should include:

- an outline of the major points in your presentation
- copies of the key visuals
- a reference list of relevant materials
- contact information: your name and address, title, and email address

Visuals

Visuals are important. Take time to do a good job, and test your visuals with colleagues. If you are making a presentation before a group of high-level decision makers who may want to use them in further discussions, package them in attractive binders and have them professionally prepared.

Some guidelines for visuals are:

- Use as few as possible to make really important points.
- Keep them simple.
- Use key words, not entire sentences.
- Limit text on a slide to 4 or 5 lines.
- Use contrasting colors.
- Focus attention with arrows, shading.
- Use pictures and graphics.
- Use motion if appropriate.
- If you use charts and graphs, make them easy to understand.

- Use at least 24-point type, so that your visuals can be seen from the last seat.
- Make copies of your visuals for handouts.

Tip: If you are using PowerPoint to make slides, you can easily print them as handouts. Go to File/Print and scroll to the "Print What?" box. Scroll to "Handouts." In the "Slides per Page" box, scroll to "3." In the "Order" box, select "Vertical," and then print. This will print your slides, three to page, with lines beside each slide for note taking.

Easel Pad

Presenters often capture comments from the audience, by writing them on an easel pad. If you plan to use an easel pad, be sure to:

- Bring one black and one blue marker; they show up best.
- Check that your markers are fresh; discard dried out markers.
- Plan the use of color for emphasis.
- Bring masking tape, to tape completed pages where people can see them.
- Practice your printing to be sure your letters are legible and large enough to be seen.
- Keep the cap on the markers when not in use. They can dry out quickly. Always discard dried out markers!

Step 5: Get Ready!

Rehearse your presentation

Try out your presentation with an audience similar to the audience you anticipate. Provide your tryout audience with a short evaluation form with space for comments on:

- Your presentation content.
- Whether it flows logically from point to point.
- Whether the visuals enhance the presentation.
- Whether your handouts are helpful.

Read their comments carefully and make any adjustments needed.

The Night Before

- Check that all your materials are in order.
- Rehearse before a mirror, using gestures that are comfortable for you.
- Plan to wear clothing appropriate to the setting
- Use the Preparation Checklist on the next page to be sure you haven't forgotten anything.
- Relax and get a good night's sleep!

On the Day of Presentation

- Come early and check the room configuration and seating.
- Be sure the equipment you need is available and working.
- Position yourself, the podium, and your materials in a comfortable manner.
- Set out your handouts for easy access.
- Set a glass of water where you will be able to reach it.

Step 6: Conduct Your Presentation

Get off to good start:

- Start on time!
- Recognize any significant individuals present.
- Introduce yourself; give your name and title.
- Display your presentation title and introduce your presentation topic.
- Establish your credibility on the topic with a *brief* background.
- Describe your presentation.
- Tell the audience how they can participate, how you will provide handouts, etc.
- If the group is larger than anticipated and handouts run out, arrange to send them later.
- Display your presentation objectives.

Preparation Checklist

Have you …
Identified the audience and its characteristics?
Defined your presentation purpose?
Developed a presentation outline, and your major and minor points?
Sequenced your material to flow smoothly from point to point?
Decided how to include audience interaction?
Developed visuals that: - are simple, uncluttered and visible? - use color for emphasis? - use appropriate graphics and pictures?
Developed handouts that: - include an outline of your key points? - include copies of key visuals? - include references for further reading? - meet copyright regulations? - include your contact information? - are labeled and stapled?
Pilot tested your presentation to get feedback on whether: - the content is relevant and interesting? - the sequence is logical? - the interactions work? - the visuals are effective? - the handouts are useful? - the presentation fits within the time limit? - the language and terms are appropriate?
Proofread all your materials for accuracy? - checked for spelling and typos? - checked all dates and author attributions? - checked that tables total to 100%?

If you checked all items above, you are ready to go!

Follow These Tips for an Effective Presentation

- Face your audience, not the screen, and don't block the screen.
- Talk to people in the back row; then everyone will hear you.
- Vary the pitch of your voice; no one likes to listen to a monotone.
- Don't read your presentation; present it as you rehearsed it.
- Maintain eye contact with your audience.
- Relax—be yourself.
- Use gestures that are comfortable for you.
- Avoid a too formal style, or projecting an overblown ego.
- Use humor that is natural to you and your audience; avoid "lame" jokes.
- Remove "figetables," keys, pocket change, etc.
- Don't clutch the podium.
- Step away from the podium or ignore it if you can't adjust it to your height.
- Don't make excuses for things you forgot, or visuals that don't look good.
- Finish on time. Check your watch as you proceed through your points. If time is running out, skip some minor points.

When answering questions from your audience:

- Repeat them so everyone can hear them.
- Answer clearly and quickly.
- If you don't know the answer, say you will research it and get back to the questioner; or better still, invite the audience to answer.

Step 7: Follow Up

After the presentation:

- Be sure to keep any promises you made to the audience.
- File your presentation materials, including the easel pad pages. They will be useful if you need to make other similar presentations; and they will also be reminder of what you will need when you have to make presentations on other topics in the future.

A Final Word

During the NFA courses, you will be making presentations from time to time and your audience will be asked to evaluate the effectiveness of your presentations using the outline on the next page.

PRESENTATION CRITIQUE FORM

Title of presentation:

Comments

__The presenter was well prepared.

__The presentation content matched the title.

__The presenter introduced his/her topic and briefly described his/her credentials at the outset.

__The presentation followed a logical sequence.

__The visuals were appropriate.

__The visuals were uncluttered and easy to read.

__Audience participation was appropriate.

__The handouts were helpful.

__The presentation met the time constraints.

__I can use the content presented in my work.