

# Presentations

## Take off by landing a speaking career

The growth of professional development programs in engineering associations across Canada has spawned a demand for technical seminar speakers. Making presentations at conferences and other events not only provides you with an opportunity to share knowledge with your peers, but also to earn additional income, market your services and travel.

Successful seminars hinge on three key elements: polished presentation skills, attractive educational handouts, and the effective use of audio-visual tools.

### How to engage the audience

It's essential to lay a solid foundation for a speaking career. Ask any outstanding presenter how they refined their speaking abilities and many will tell you they took classes or attended Toastmasters, an international organization of clubs focused on improving communication skills. Toastmasters, according to business presenter Denise Wallace, of Einblau & Associates, a management consulting firm in B.C., provides "honest feedback in a comfortable secure environment." In that setting you are able to refine your delivery such as how to speak clearly, how to project your voice and vary the tone, use gestures and eye contact.

Top-rated leadership trainer Greg Campeau of Campeau Learning in Vancouver, points out that good eye contact enables you to connect with your audience and read them well. "Ask yourself," he says, "Do they seem to understand what I'm saying? Do they look bored?"

Wallace also points out that effective speakers refrain from talking down to their audience. Likewise, Campeau says, "The ability to identify with your audience is the mark of a great speaker.... Every time you try to impress them, you lose them."

Wallace and Campeau stress the importance of understanding your audience. If possible, find out in advance how many people will be attending, what their professional backgrounds are and where they are from, so that you can customize your session to their needs.

"The best presenters are genuinely trying to help their audience," notes Campeau.

### Break down complex topics

No matter how technical the topic, a good presenter can

make it interesting. I have heard a world-renowned Ontario-based building science engineer give sessions where there is never a dull moment. Aside from using humour, he excels because of his thorough understanding and passion for his subject, which are qualities of a superb educator.

Encouraging questions and discussion among the audience is a simple and effective way of engaging participants. And incorporating group activities can further enhance learning.

Geochemist Stephen Day of SRK Consulting, for example, involves participants in his popular acid rock drainage talks by bringing dozens of rocks for the audience to examine, discuss and ask questions about.

"The audience of the 21st century is tired of talking heads. They want involvement," emphasizes Campeau.

Successful speakers also keep their message simple, "so that people can internalize it and it can have an impact," says Campeau.

Such is one of the keys of success of the aforementioned building scientist, who breaks down complex topics to make for easier comprehension. To ensure his audience understands the consistencies of certain materials he's discussing, he describes them in terms of foods such as brownies or Slurpees. Using analogies and metaphors is one of the best ways of communicating. You can draw on your field experiences, examine case studies and punctuate your talks with brief relevant anecdotes from everyday life.

### Useful handouts

Since audience members usually flip through your handouts before hearing you speak, they often develop their first impression of you based on that material. Set a professional tone by creating visually appealing, information-rich learning packages. Wallace invests a great deal of time in developing handouts. Her advice is to keep them simple. The best colour combination is dark text on a light, uncluttered background.

Like using a road map before embarking on a trip, provide a guide for where your session is going by having the agenda as the first slide. Since handouts often have two to three PowerPoint slides per page, ensure the font is large enough to read. As well, spell check and have titles on each slide. Wallace advises speakers to list text in bullet form,

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include some blank space, and refrain from using too many fonts per slide.

If your budget allows for it, make colour copies and include graphs and charts. Effective presenters use clip art, cartoons and photos to enhance the learning experience. Campeau's handouts are appealing because they have diagrams, quotes by famous people and an extensive resource list. Providing resources such as websites, books, articles, and other useful information at the back of the handout is another mark of a high quality session. Check on copyright issues before including others' work in your handouts.

### Audio-visual equipment

While a PowerPoint presentation is the most popular format, you can spice up your talks by using other forms of audio-visual equipment. Add impact by showing video clips beamed from your computer. Find out the size of the screen they will be shown on, as some television screens are too small for participants to see. Overhead projectors are suitable for large groups, but the text needs to be large enough to read.

As flipcharts can be difficult to view, avoid using them if there are more than 30 participants. If you do use one, check that the pens work and are dark.

### Be well prepared

Arrive at least 30 minutes before your talk to ensure the audio-visual equipment, microphone, internet connection (if necessary) and lighting work properly. If there are more than 30 people, a lapel microphone is a good tool so that you can walk around and still be heard. Familiarize yourself with the slide advancer and laser pointer if it's not yours. When making your presentation, refrain from moving the laser pointer around the screen too much as it can become distracting and be hard on participants' eyes.

Chairs and tables should be arranged so that participants don't have to strain to see or hear you. The best seating plan is what is known in event planning circles as "classroom style." This is where there are wide rectangular tables and chairs facing the front. Request that there be plenty of space between each audience member to ensure they are comfortable.

With so many opportunities in sight, there's no better time than now to launch your speaking career. You'll find that by investing time and energy to refine your presentation skills, you'll reap many rewards. **CCE**

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#### Resources

- Toastmasters: [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org)
- International Training in Communication: [www.itcintl.com](http://www.itcintl.com)

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## Three Common Complaints About Presentations & How to Avoid Them

### COMPLAINT #1 — "The speaker spent too much time going over basic information"

#### HOW TO AVOID IT:

- Be clear in the seminar description about who the intended audience is and what topics will be discussed.
- Find out as much as possible beforehand about the seminar participants.
- Keep in mind that participants will be coming into the session with a variety of backgrounds.
- Ask the audience at the beginning to introduce themselves and their professional backgrounds. Ask them to tell you one thing they want to learn.

### COMPLAINT #2 — "The seminar was too rushed"

#### HOW TO AVOID IT:

- Before agreeing to a seminar length, figure out a realistic time for each section of your talk and include at least 15 minutes for questions.
- Run through your presentation several times beforehand to ensure you conclude on time.
- Stay on topic, answer questions succinctly, and stick closely to your agenda.

### COMPLAINT #3 — "The speaker didn't answer questions well"

#### HOW TO AVOID IT:

- Hone your listening skills.
- Repeat questions back to the audience to ensure you've understood the question (and so that those who didn't hear the question will know what is being discussed).
- If you're unsure of the answer, say so. Then, offer to get back to the person promptly with an answer.