

Effective Strategies for Successful Presentations: An NLP Analysis

Cristina Mihaela Zamfir

"Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters

cristina_m_zamfir@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the context of business interactions, the presentation process and the abilities it activates are of utmost importance.

Firstly, the paper attempts to present the basic communication and relational skills for effective presentations that are absolutely necessary for trainers and managers to create a bond with their audience.

Secondly, the article helps us to highlight the powerful role of the essential elements which appeal to any presentation as well as the 'signposts' and 'sandwich' methods that establish a strong rapport with the listeners during the presentation.

The results of the research show that the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) approach to the presentation process provides a better understanding of the linguistic characteristics, techniques and strategies which enrich and make our speech more persuasive.

Key words: business communication, NLP, presentation skills, 'sandwich' method, signposts

J.E.L. classification: Z00

1. Introduction

An essential activity that makes a difference in business is the ability to present your ideas to a group and lead the discussion. The effective presenters' search for a "well-constructed argument" is best founded on establishing and maintaining rapport with their audience. Various practical strategies, skills, tools, techniques and learning styles have been provided by NLP researchers to help professional trainers and teachers, managers and consultants share knowledge and information and create a bond with their audience (Johnson and Barrall, 2006; Pile and Lowe, 2006).

I would like to focus on the models/principles of *speaker-listener communication* which I find particularly relevant for building professional relationships.

The NLP practitioner Robert Dilts' book on "Effective Presentation Skills" (Meta Publications 1994) aims at covering and unveiling *what* professional skills need to be practised and managed to produce a very detailed list of skills divided into *Basic Communication Skills* and *Basic Relational Skills* which can be summarised under 12 headings.

2. Theoretical background

According to Robert Dilts (1994), an effective presentation focuses on verbal skills as well as on the specific techniques, methods and structures we use in delivering it. In his book, *Effective Presentation Skills* (quoted in Encyclopedia of NLP by Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, p.996), he makes a synthetic description of the basic skills used in delivering information:

Basic Communication Skills

1. Using all Representational Channels for "Output"
 - verbal – words
 - visual – illustrations and images
 - kinesthetic – gestures and demonstrations
2. Verbal Pacing of all Representational Systems

3. "Analogical Marking" – Emphasizing Messages with Voice Tone and Gestures
4. Making Micro Demonstrations – "Doing what you are talking about"
5. Creating and Utilizing Metaphors and "Universals"
6. Giving Examples Incorporating key words and Related Vocabulary
7. Facilitating Understanding and Recall Through Anchoring
8. Backtracking and Reviewing Relevant Information

Basic Relational Skills

9. Developing a 'Second Position' with the Audience
10. Pacing and Leading
11. Responding to Positive Intentions
12. Reframing, Reformulating and Paraphrasing the Responses of Others

On the basis of this description and through an appropriate use of interactive language (Perlman, 2006; Grussendorf, 2009), skilful presenters bond with their listeners more easily within a shared context.

When presenting an argument and giving reasons in a presentation it is clearly important to prepare useful language (phrases) to organize, explain and emphasize each reason logically and effectively.

3. Essential elements appealing to any presentation

The research in the area of presentations was conducted by the NLP practitioner and social psychologist Andrew Bradbury (2006) who adopted a different and more modern approach drawing on 5 elements which apply to *any* presentation and make up the *mnemonic OSCAR*:

| | |
|-----------|-------------------|
| clear | O utcome |
| layered | S tructure |
| selective | C hunking |
| positive | A ttitude |
| flexible | R esponse |

Outcome

A successful presentation is guaranteed when the speaker has a "well – formed outcome", i.e. the more focussed s/he stays on what is to be assumed, the more achievable the outcome will become.

According to Bradbury, the presenter should always have a set of outcomes – one for himself/herself and one for their audience:

e.g. *I want to make a detailed presentation of three good reasons why we should use ID tags to identify our brand.*

I want the people at the presentation to feel free to ask questions at any time during my talk and work together, with joint effort, to protect our name and our investment.

Such outcomes usually deal with the organization of your talk, why it is relevant to the audience and they should be clearly stated and adhered to at the very beginning of your presentation:

e.g. *I'll start by describing a number of reasons of why proposing a system of electronic ID tags is necessary to make our company's products easy to identify.*

Moreover, I would be glad to welcome your ideas to achieve this goal and take action now to find a secure method of protecting our brand name.

Thus, Bradbury suggests that "This approach quickly puts the audience at ease because they no longer have the feeling that they must blindly follow wherever you choose to lead" (2006, p.111).

By structuring your arguments in a logical order and offering a clear background, the audience will know and follow at all times what you want to do and how you want to do it.

Structure

In structuring your presentation, it is essential to consider, on the one hand, the "what's in a mode" aspect, i.e. listen out for the different sensory "modes" or representational system predicates/preferred thinking styles (PTS) in the way people emphasize key words (using visual, auditory, or kinesthetic channels) or show feelings (making use of strong and exaggerated language) to respond emotionally to your arguments.

On the other hand, meta programs, like PTS in NLP, work best in presentations when we recognize which filters a person works with and frame our communication, in consequence. Briefly, experiment whatever meta programs motivate and bring a change in people's reaction to what we do and say (people who operate *in time* or *through time*; people who work *towards* or *away from* the stated result; people who feel more comfortable in a *proactive* / versus / *reactive* mode).

Chunking

Selecting the correct chunk type in any presentation, be it chunking up or down, will improve the chance of getting your message across. To put it differently, in order to arouse audience interest, "your best option is to choose a middle-of-the-range starting point, and then chunk up. Allow questions from the audience [...], but avoid getting bogged down in 'nitty-gritty' details" (Bradbury, 2006, p.112).

Attitude

Bradbury claims that attitude in presentations means more than "*simply think positive*" since the presenter is considered as important as his or her topic. When delivering a presentation, personality and culture can influence your body language and indicate self- confidence or lack of it. That is why, in the first minutes of your presentation, you should concentrate on getting your audience's attention, using your personality more, being enthusiastic, and building good rapport with the people in the room.

A similar approach was offered by Dilts and DeLozier (2000) who remarked that, in NLP, a person's attitude stems from his/her internal state, the mental map they operate with and their meta program patterns. In both Bradbury's (2006) and Dilts and DeLozier's (2000) opinion, attitudes in presentations are often related to particular values, beliefs, or non-verbal signals. Optimistic attitudes of effective presenters are characterized by a positive outlook and the attempt to find something good in whatever is occurring (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000 after Grolier's Encyclopedia, 1991); the strongly held belief that your presentation will create a positive intention is sent out to your audience through clear non-verbal signals (Bradbury, 2006).

Response

From the NLP perspective, what makes a presentation stronger is the fifth element of the mnemonic OSCAR, i.e. our creative and flexible *response* to environmental changes, our ability to view any situation through at least three positions: our own, the other person's standpoint, and that of the unbiased observer.

Bradbury further clarifies that the fifth element which is a 'mixture of sensitivity and flexibility' helps top presenters to constantly "switch back and forth between viewpoints, always aware of the response they are getting from their audience, and able to customise the presentation as they go in order to achieve their desired outcome" (Bradbury, 2006, pp.112-113).

The rationale behind this idea is that presenters who have taken multiple perspectives can use perceptual positions as a modality of becoming increasingly "response-able" for their behaviours' consequences, producing self-mastery and achieving desired outcomes.

4. The signposts' functions and the 'sandwich' method

A clear and structural perspective on effective presentations comes from the ability to give your speech a simple, unloaded and perceivable organization within your audience's attention span and retention capability. It is well-known that most people might have a real problem with retention of information, and as Perlman (2006) explains, once you "confine yourself to a very few points that relate to your central purpose, your speech will be even better if your content is in some sort of logical sentence [...] a story arc for the audience to follow" (2006, p.15). He further argues that verbal signals ("signposts") mark your transitions from one subject to another, "keeping your audience abreast of where you are in the discussion" (2006, p.16).

Signposts fulfill different functions depending on where you take your audience along with you:

a) *Saying what is coming*

e.g. *In this part of my presentation, I'd like to talk about...*

So first I'm going to tell you about...

First, I'll give you some general information about...

So, let me start with...

Let me first give you a brief overview.

b) Moving on to the next point

e.g. *This leads to the next point, which is... (price).*

Let's now turn to the issue of product innovation.

This brings us directly to my next question.

This brings me to the second thing I'd like to say.

c) Indicating the end of a section

e.g. *So far, I've talked about [topic #1] and [topic #2]. Now let me acquaint you with [topic#3].*

Well, so much for the background and the conceptual framework of [concept].

Let me close this portion of my presentation with a general remark.

Let me finish up this section with some comments.

d) Referring back

e.g. *Let me go back and elaborate on each of these issues.*

Which brings me back to the key message I have for you today: ...

As I mentioned before / pointed out in the first section / have already explained / said earlier, I'd like to focus on our new marketing techniques.

e) Summarizing a point

e.g. *Before I stop, I'd like to run through my main points again...*

Let me go over the key issues again.

To conclude / In conclusion, I'd like to...

To sum up, we...

Signalling the end of your talk by using the 'sandwich' technique is another strategy for making good conclusions. The 'sandwich' method is commonly used when the speaker intends to establish and maintain good rapport with his audience throughout the presentation (Zamfir, 2018).

From an NLP point of view, the speaker's opening of the presentation with a story / anecdote / joke will trigger creativity, arouse the audience's curiosity by putting them into a positive frame of mind, and promote deeper level change and problem solving. Thus, participants will stay tuned for more information and explanations about a particular subject at a later time.

In this light, the aim of using a story, an interesting fact, or metaphor as a less formal opening of a presentation can diffuse a tense situation or explain a difficult problem in a friendly manner:

Typical phrases – Tell a story / interesting fact in the introduction:

e.g. *I clearly remember when I attended a conference in Barcelona. ...*

At a seminar in Berlin, I was addressed the following question: ...

I read in an article somewhere that the only place where 'success' comes before 'work' is in the dictionary. I tend to agree with that!

Typical phrases – Finish the story / interesting fact in the conclusion:

e.g. *Remember what I said at the beginning of my talk today? Well...*

Let me go back to the question I mentioned at the start of my presentation. Remember...

Indeed, success without work won't swing the door open to you. So this just shows you that...

To stress this point more strongly, Dilts and DeLozier (2000) also state that stories "can often bypass conscious resistance, confusion and conflict [...], provide a way of thinking that is different from the way of thinking that is creating the problem. Like all their forms of communication, [...] storytelling is considered a primary presentation skill and change method in NLP trainings and interventions" (2000, p.1309).

The 'sandwich' method for effective presentations is challenging and makes a lasting impression. It increases the presenter's chances of saying something memorable, inspirational and entertaining. Thus, the speech becomes more convincing and authentic, especially if it draws extensively on personal experience. The pitfall could be too much "I / me" focus, and the solution to connect your experience with the participants' personal development and growth.

5. Research methods and material

In my research, I considered that a worth mentioning approach related to the process of delivering presentations is to analyze this key business skill according to language accuracy and effectiveness. Hence, I have emphasized that preparing structural and signposting language, particularly at transitions between sections, enables speakers to present ideas, keep people focused and persuade them of the strengths of their arguments. I have also concentrated on analyzing strategies and techniques (the 'sandwich' method) which function more powerfully when we want to make a connection between the beginning and the end of our talk – start telling a joke or funny story in the introduction, stop at an exciting moment and move on to the main part..

The data illustrate that, to do this successfully, we often need to use clear language, pause appropriately and stress key words and phrases.

6. Findings

The findings of my research show that body language, visual elements and a permanent interaction with the public are a 'must' when we speak in a controlled manner and are open to any suggestions, questions or comments without taking them personally.

When delivering a presentation, one has to find out the audience's information background, keeping in mind that the content of the presentation is just as important as the presentation style. Adjusting language so that everybody can understand is the key which gives us more confidence in both formal and informal presentations by using specialist/vs/non-specialist terms, reading from a script/vs/speaking without a script and checking understanding.

The logical structure (beginning, middle and end) highlights our personal intentions, a well-structured speech, or the relevance of our talk to our audience.

7. Conclusions

To sum up, the art of making presentations is based on gaining the audience's attention and keeping it. The challenge is to constantly adjust the presentation style according to the purpose, the situation and the audience.

The results show that in style-oriented company cultures, presenters are expected to create an impact by making their presentations entertaining. The humour (jokes and funny stories), pace (fast and dynamic), colourful visuals and body language guarantee the success of a presentation.

Moreover, the skillful use of the six conversational elements stimulates, on the one hand, live communication by inviting the audience to share our reaction and thought processes (Perlman 2006).

On the other hand, the 'sandwich' technique and the signposts' functions help maintain rapport with the audience and get our message across throughout the presentation.

Overall, these techniques and language structures are expected to serve as guidelines for the seasoned presenter to make his/her presentation as dynamic and entertaining as possible in order to capture attention and arouse curiosity among the participants.

8. References

- Bradbury, A., 2006. *Develop Your NLP Skills*. 3rd Edition. London: Kogan Page.
- Dilts, R., 1994. *Effective Presentation Skills*. CA, Capitola: Meta Publications.
- Dilts, R. and DeLozier, J. 2000. *Encyclopedia of Neuro-Linguistic Programming and NLP New Coding*. Santa Cruz: NLP University Press.
- Grolier. 1991. *Encyclopedia of Knowledge*. Grolier Incorporated.
- Grussendorf, M., 2009. *English for Presentations*. Bucharest: All Educational Publishing House.
- Johnson, C. and Barrall, I., 2006. *Intelligent Business. Skills Book*. England: Pearson Education Limited.

- Perlman, A.M., 2006. *Perfect Phrases for Executive Presentations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Pile, L. and Lowe, S., 2006. *Intelligent Business. Teacher's Book*. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Zamfir, C.M. 2018. *Business Communication and NLP. Successful Drivers in Theory and Practice*. Bucharest: University Publishing House.