

Presenting with confidence

*Speaking at a conference or leading a workshop can take a technically competent EHO into terrifying new territory. **Richard Payne** offers tips on keeping cool before an audience*

Many people believe that being able to give a presentation is a gift. While that may be true and some people have greater natural ability than others, many of the necessary skills can be learned and developed through training and practice.

The role of the environmental health professional requires knowledge, skill and technical expertise, but in the current climate it is increasingly important for individuals to explain what they do to a variety of different audiences. Developing good presentation skills is also beneficial from a career perspective as it is an asset employers value in their staff.

Planning is the key to success and time spent planning is rarely wasted. Start by gathering your material and allow plenty of time, as throwing something together the night before a presentation will not provide enough time to rehearse or become familiar with the material. Write out what it is you wish to say, word for word and read through it a few times, then precis this script into key phrases, again reading it through. The final step is to transfer just key words onto index cards. Use these cards to jog your memory when speaking and you will sound much more natural and spontaneous than you would reading a script out word for word. Using cards rather than a script will also allow more eye contact with the audience. Also, when one reads

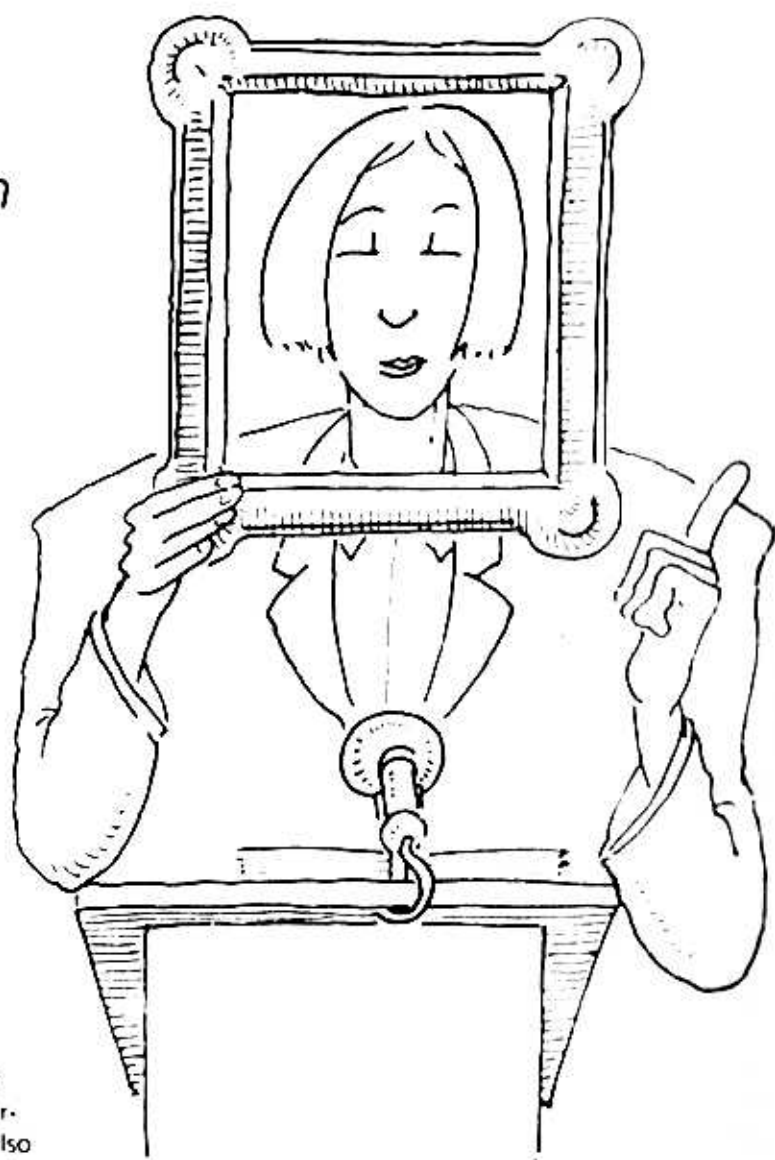


Illustration: Mark Hackett

a presentation the voice becomes a monotone and it gives the impression that the speaker is not familiar with the material.

As you stand up to address the audience, be aware of your body language. Are you looking confident, or are you apologising for your existence? To avoid the latter, try to stand in the middle of the speaking area (centre stage), ensure you are balanced and stand up straight, keeping your chin parallel with the floor. Your weight should be evenly distributed on both feet rather than on one leg. Being balanced and standing tall will also ensure that you project a confident image even if you feel a little nervous. Before you

speak, pause, and take a deep breath as this will support your voice.

You may wish to start with a greeting and personal introduction followed by a positive stroke: "Good afternoon everybody. My name is Richard Payne. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you."

You must then develop an "opening hook". Your objective is to grab the audience's attention straight away, so try to avoid the over-used words "I would like to talk to you about..." as this will not gain audience attention.

Here is an example of a weak and a strong opening:

Weak: "I would like to talk to you about ways to improve one's diet."

Strong: "You are what you eat. Have you ever wondered what this means? Is it possible to improve your health and life expectancy? Of course it is."

Note the use of positive statements on questions in the strong example. Other devices which can be used for a hook are starting statements, quotes, descriptive phrases or stories.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Now you have gained your audience's attention, the next step is to outline the aims and objectives for the presentation. An aim is a broad statement of intent, and an objective is a description of where your audience will be or what they will know by the time you have finished speaking. Then tell your audience what you are going to tell them *ie* outline the points or topics you will cover. It is advisable never to cover more than three major points; this is known as "the rule of three". An audience will feel confident that they will be able to remember three things, however if you tell them you are going to present 53 points they will tune out immediately. It is better to present three points clearly, than to cram in many points poorly. Now it's time to launch into each of your points – although you have three points you can say a number of things about each point – and when you have covered each one, summarise and signpost before you move onto the next one. This will help the listener establish where they are and where they are going. When everything has been covered, move to a grand summary which will tell

them everything you have just told them and then call the audience to action. The call to action is your request for the audience to do something as a result of listening to you: "I'd like you to consider my proposals very carefully." A good example of a call to action is Sir David Steele's rallying cry: "Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government." A little unprophetic, but certainly memorable.

And finally... your ending. Endings should be short, memorable and in some way echo the opening, as this will suggest a completed journey. One golden rule regarding endings, is that once you have uttered the words "in conclusion" or "finally" you should only continue to speak for a further three minutes, otherwise an ending will lose impact.

Having dealt with the message, let us turn to the messenger. You will have as much effect on your audience as your words. Half an hour after a presentation, the audience will retain very little of what you have said but they will be influenced by your body language and tone of voice and this is what they will retain for longer.

Eye contact is a crucial part of your delivery. Do look at your audience. Try not to stare out of the window or focus for too long on one individual, as the rest of the audience will feel left out and also mirror what you are doing – *ie* after a while they will follow your gaze. If someone asks a question, concentrate your eye contact on them, while dealing with the question. The general rule is to sweep the audience slowly, from side to side, as you are speaking. This requires practice, but after a while becomes second nature.

Movement is another important aspect of your delivery. You do not need to stand on the spot. Indeed movement is expected and also has the benefit of creating visual interest, which helps stimulate an audience during a long presentation. Avoid distracting the audience by pacing up and down in an unfocused manner. Move from stillness to stillness. Avoid walking and talking and also turning your back and talking.

Facial expression is another vital area to consider. Appropriate facial gestures and expression are an important part of communication. If you are "pleased to announce" look pleased *ie* smile. If you are "disappointed to discover"

then look a little more serious. In other words, your facial gesture should match the words. If it is an important presentation, practising in front of a mirror or using a video camera is worthwhile. It is interesting to note those individuals who use appropriate facial gesture have colourful voices and those with little facial expression tend to mirror this in their vocal delivery. Commitment to the subject usually gives the voice a natural expression.

PROPS

Let us move on to the use of hands when speaking. Try not to grip onto props such as lecterns, flipcharts and tables. Place your hands on these items to steady yourself, but do not grip for grim life!

Alternatively you can occupy your hands with the cards, but avoid single sheets of paper because if you suffer from shaking hands, every word you utter will be accompanied by the rustle of paper. Use hand gestures to help emphasise points, but avoid aggressive gestures like pointing or shaking a fist. Try to bring hands back to a resting position when you have made a gesture, as this avoids repetitive motions. Placing hands in pockets is best avoided as are hands placed behind the back or clasped in front of the body.

The voice should be vital and alive, which takes a little practice. Try to emphasise a few words in each phrase and do not speak too quickly, but vary the pace to create interest. Pausing between important points will provide the listeners with time to think about what you have said. Varying the pitch is also a good tip. The human speaking voice has a range of eight notes and the pitch should be changed every time you start a new thought or phrase. A good example of the use of pitch is news readers. Note how every new

story they move onto has an accompanying pitch change.

Presentations can be enhanced by using visual aids – although it can be tempting with modern technology to fall into the trap of preparing too many visuals, and allowing them to drive the presentation. This should be avoided, as should reading lots of text from acetates.

Visual aids should only be used if they help the audience to remember, focus attention, save time or reinforce the point being made. It is best not to mix different types of visual aids or turn the lights on and off too often, as this may confuse the audience. When designing visual aids keep the designs and diagrams simple and use bold lettering. Finally resist the temptation to turn and talk to flipcharts or overhead projector screens, and always face your audience.

Putting all this advice together will take some rehearsal, so do not make your first run through the presentation itself.

Finally a word about nerves. Nerves are natural and you will usually find you are most nervous at the start – the

anticipation is often worse than the actual doing. Learn your introduction and opening so you can be confident when your nerves are at their peak, take a few deep breaths and this will reduce heart rate and blood pressure. Get a good night's sleep if you can. Never be tempted to calm your nerves with alcohol, as it does not mix well with adrenaline!

The more presentations you do, the easier it gets, so take all opportunities to speak in public and develop your skills. By following these guidelines and preparing effectively, you will be well on your way to delivering confident presentations.

Richard Payne is a partner in BSPS Training Consultancy. He can be contacted on 0121 704 0972.

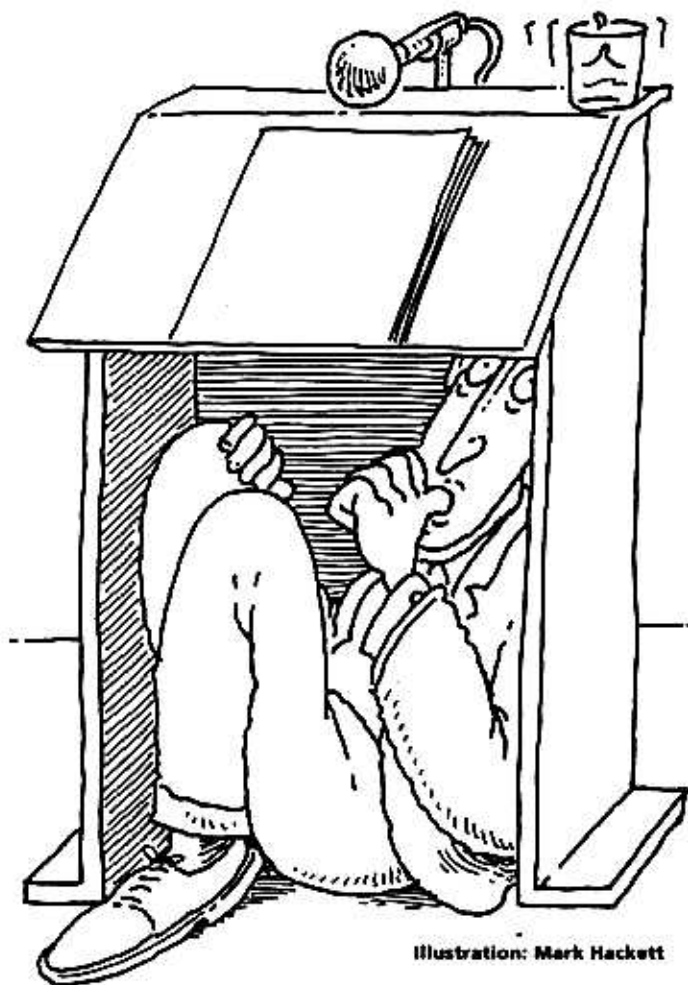


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