

For Great Presentations - *Talk to the Dog*

How often have you seen it happen? People who are normally interesting and fun to be around, suddenly turning to stone when they have to give an important presentation. It's as if a switch is thrown and they become cold, expressionless robots – not at all the people they really are.

MatchPoint helps organisations win bids, proposals and tenders. We harvest and build best practice, and provide our clients with expert resources, skills coaching and more effective ways to win. This tip will help make winning easier.

Consider the usual checklist for an important presentation: content, key points, nice suit, equipment, lots of PowerPoint slides - and all of it, almost completely useless without one essential ingredient - you!

Why? Ask yourself what people want from a face-to-face presentation. They want something they can't get from documents, emails and even phone conversations. They want insight. Not information, but the full, rich perspective that can flow between one human being and another.

Most of us accept that it's not what you say but how you say it. Tone of voice, phrasing, body language – that kind of thing. Published research puts the importance of non-verbal communication as high as 65% – that's twice as important as the words themselves. And yet when most people are asked to present, these are the very things they seem to drive out of their delivery.

So how do we fix this? What's the best audience to practice on? Well, strange as it may seem, it's hard to find a better one than the family dog.

Just look at how we talk to our dogs. We suddenly come alive. The face relaxes, the eyes light up, and the voice springs with enthusiasm and excitement. Why? Partly because most dogs are quick to give back that kind of attention. Partly because they won't judge or mock us. And partly because they can't understand much of what we say anyway.

What we are doing is creating a powerful connection with another living thing, using visual and audio cues to stir feelings and emotions in our target audience - exactly the same objective as your next important business presentation.

Think of your medium not as the content of your presentation, but as the hearts and minds of the audience itself. You are trying to mould them around your own perspective. Just like the family dog, your audience will respond to commitment, enthusiasm and passion. And, like the family dog, if you just stand there and talk they may not take in very much of it. Worse still, they may just roll over and start scratching themselves!

Catch yourself in the act of talking to the dog. Bottle that. And use just some of it in your next presentation. Remember, your challenge is not to speak your message but to 'feel' your message across to your audience. You want them to feel what you feel.

The key to good delivery is to be yourself. Don't try to be Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King, just be confident in being you. We are not all natural born actors, but we are all of us human. That's what the audience wants to connect with, so that's what you should give them. Yes, it makes you a bit more vulnerable as you let down some of your defensive walls, but it turns you into a far more powerful communicator. Yes, you will still be nervous, but giving in to just being yourself is the best way to calm your nerves.

If you want to communicate well, use the techniques you have been practicing intuitively since birth. Don't expect to find the magic formula in some book or training course. The real key to a good presentation is the energy and meaning that flows between one person and another.

Just ask your dog.