

Making Your Message Stick

USING ADULT LEARNING TECHNIQUES TO DESIGN A PRESENTATION THAT WORKS

PAMELA J. GORDON

When it comes to selling your services, getting your foot in the door is only half the battle. Presenting your message so that it “lands” and “sticks” is the other half. After all, your goal as a consultant is to move your prospect or client to a particular action. That won’t happen unless your message is understood and, even more important, remembered.

The problem is, like most people, your clients are on information overload—bombed by what scientists estimate to be more than 40,000 nonrelated concepts each day. So it’s not surprising that the people you meet and do business with are likely to forget as much as 90% of the information you tell them within 48 hours of meeting with them.

How can you pack more “punch” into your phone calls, meetings, and other presentations so that your message resonates with clients and prospects? The key lies in first understanding how adults learn, process, and store information in the brain—and then using some simple adult learning–based strategies to craft your message for greater impact.

Decoding Memory

The brain is like a sorting station. When new information comes in, the brain looks for connections by asking itself a series of questions that help it “decide” whether it wants to store that information in long-term memory. The

better the connection, the more likely it is that this information will be remembered and accessible at a later date.

You can use the brain’s storage capacity to your advantage, but first you need to recognize that each of your clients perceives and processes information differently. In fact, researchers have concluded that there are four distinct learning styles. These learning styles can be categorized by the types of questions the brain asks in order to sort and store information.

- “Why is this important to me?” Clients who are Type 1 learners will respond best to your message when you provide specific examples showing how your product or service is relevant to their needs.
- “What are the facts?” Clients who are Type 2 learners will respond best to your message when you support it with facts and figures.
- “How is this practical?” Clients who are Type 3 learners will respond best to your message when you show them how your product or service is useful and immediately practical for them.
- “What if I do this?” Clients who are Type 4 learners will respond best to your message when you furnish multiple options for clients to try out the information for themselves.

The reason these learning distinctions are important is simple: If you tailor your message

■
*Here’s how
to get the
most out of
your speaking
opportunities.*

to incorporate the needs of all four learning styles, you will significantly increase the ability of clients and prospects to value and use the information you present.

How to get started? Whether you are convincing a prospect to go ahead with a proposal, helping clients to understand and act on your recommendations, or presenting a workshop or keynote, the following eight steps can help ensure that your message makes a lasting impact.

STEP 1: *Be Goal Oriented*

Before you pick up the phone to call a client or prospect or write a single word of a letter, proposal, or presentation, it's crucial first to be clear on your objective—in other words, you need to determine what you want your audience to *know* and *do* with the information you're offering.

Once you identify the specific outcome you want to achieve, you can structure your message with a clear purpose, direction, and sequence that will help you gain and hold your listeners' attention, thereby increasing the chances that they will follow your recommendations or take the action you want.

STEP 2: *Know Your Audience*

Next, think about the needs of your clients in order to determine how best to achieve your objectives. To the extent possible, you will want to tailor your message to parallel their specific concerns. The reason? Like all adult learners, clients will respond best when they can relate the information you're sharing to their own personal experiences.

By incorporating examples that your audience can relate to, you will demonstrate that you understand their needs and that you have a solution to their problems—a key step toward building a successful consultative relationship.

STEP 3: *Get Organized*

With your goal firmly in mind, begin to think about how you plan to deliver your message. Whether you're sending a written proposal, meeting one-on-one with a prospect or client, or delivering a presentation to a group, your

message will be more effective if you follow a basic structure that includes the following:

1. *Attention-getting opener.* Begin with a brief introduction that sets up the information you're presenting and establishes your credibility as an expert in your field. For example, "As a consultant to some of the country's fastest-growing companies, I've seen CEOs struggle with three common obstacles to success."

2. *Brief overview.* Next, define your purpose if your message is informational, or create a sense of urgency or need if your message is persuasive in nature. For example: "I'd like to share with you three simple steps that will make a direct impact on your bottom line."

3. *Key ideas and recommendations.* Then, define three key points you want your clients to learn or understand about your message. Why three? When it comes to memory, three is a "golden" number. Studies have shown that it is easier for the brain to remember information when it is grouped into triads. If your message includes more than three key points, you run the risk of overwhelming your clients and losing their attention.

4. *Summary.* Once you've told your clients what you want them to know in your three key points, tell them what you want them to do with the information. In other words, lay out the specific steps or recommendations you want them to take next.

5. *Disconnect/close.* Finally, conclude your discussion with a quick restatement of your opening. Remember, the final words you say to your clients are likely to be the ones they remember.

By organizing your information into this five-part structure, you can ensure a logical flow of information that your clients and prospects can easily follow and that also

Studies have shown that it is easier for the brain to remember information when it is grouped into triads.

What's Your Purpose?

There are two basic types of presentations: informational and persuasive. Both are similar in structure. However, the way you send information into the brain is decidedly different in each.

For an *informational presentation*, your goal is to share complex information with your clients.

To do so:

- Establish your credibility in the opener.
- State your purpose and tell clients what you're going to tell them: "I'm here today to share three ideas . . . cover five key points . . . give you four important tips . . ."
- Cover your information in three main points.
- Summarize what you told them.
- Close.

For a *persuasive presentation*, your goal is to persuade your client to act, feel, or believe differently about something.

To do so:

- Establish your credibility in the opener.
- Create a sense of urgency about your message. "Last year in corporate America, \$60 billion was wasted on . . ." Once you've captured their attention, present your recommendations or solutions.
- Cover your information in three main points.
- Tell them what you want them to do with the information.
- Close.

adheres to the golden rule of adult learning: Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em. And then tell them again.

Repetition is key to your success. The brain processes information five to seven times faster than the average person can speak. To ensure your clients are "tracking" with you, keep them on point and focused. By restating the important points in your message—in different ways—you will reinforce the information you want them to remember and directly impact their ability to take action.

STEP 4: *Chunk It Up*

The brain resists isolated pieces of information. As you think about your three central points, link key concepts together. For example, if you wanted a client to understand why your product is unique vis-à-vis the competition, group together all the features of your product that are leading edge—and then discuss them at one time. By combining several details about your product into one "chunk," you make it easier for your client to remember more information about your product later on, when it comes time to move them to a specific action or conclusion.

STEP 5: *Keep It Simple*

Simplicity is key to getting your message up and landed. Make sure each sentence you speak serves a distinct purpose and furthers your goal. Adults can comfortably pack only seven to nine bits of information into short-term memory at a time—so when it comes to making an impact, less is definitely more.

STEP 6: *Ground Your Information*

The human brain prefers images to words. This is why it's important to weave in specific examples, including stories, metaphors, analogies, and visuals that emphasize your main points. These can be the "glue" that makes your message "stick" in the minds of prospects and clients.

But here's an important rule: As you use a story or visual to illustrate a key point, always circle back and restate the point before moving on to the next. If you don't, you run the risk of confusing clients and losing the impact of your information.

STEP 7: *Don't Leave Anyone Behind*

Your success as a consultant is dependent upon your ability to help clients understand

PAMELA J. GORDON
(PGLearn@aol.com) is an educator and international speaker who champions adult learning methodologies. She owns and operates the Pamela Gordon Adult Learning Center, teaches graduate school at the University of Denver, and coaches professional speakers, corporate executives, and consultants to maximize an adult's capacity to learn.

and remember your message. If you craft your message without thinking about your audience, chances are that 75% of the people you talk with are going to leave without getting what they need to do business with you. To make the most of your efforts, address the needs of each of the four learning styles in your presentation.

STEP 8: Script Carefully and Then Revise

Many consultants make presentations off-the-cuff, without ever writing down a single word. They are so knowledgeable about their content that they don't feel they need a script. The problem is, without writing out your key points, you can't be sure your message will meet the needs of all four types of adult learners. When you have your message on paper, review and revise as many times as necessary.

Conclusion

Once you're satisfied your presentation lands your information and achieves your objective, it's time to work on your delivery. There is simply no substitute for rehearsal. Delivering your message—whether it's in front of a mirror or standing before a family member or co-worker—will let you learn whether or not your message has the power you need.

Remember, you have only one chance to make a good impression. By incorporating some basic adult learning strategies into your telephone calls, proposals, recommendations, and meetings, you can help ensure that the information you present will go a long way toward winning clients and building your business. ■

INDEXED UNDER:

Public speaking



CALL FOR PAPERS

Papers, both brief and long, on a wide range of topics are invited by the editors of this journal. We seek contributions on such topics as: practical tips on any aspect of consulting to management, problems faced by consultants (with or without solutions), statements by consultants on matters of broad public interest, effects on consulting of developments in the realm of management, and matters of professional ethics. In accordance with the specifications suggested in the Contributor's Guide (see the C2M website at www.C2M.com), please submit papers or proposals, together with a brief biography of the author, to:

editor@C2M.com

Submissions are acknowledged, and a substantive response is provided. Papers also may be submitted to an editor in your area of interest.