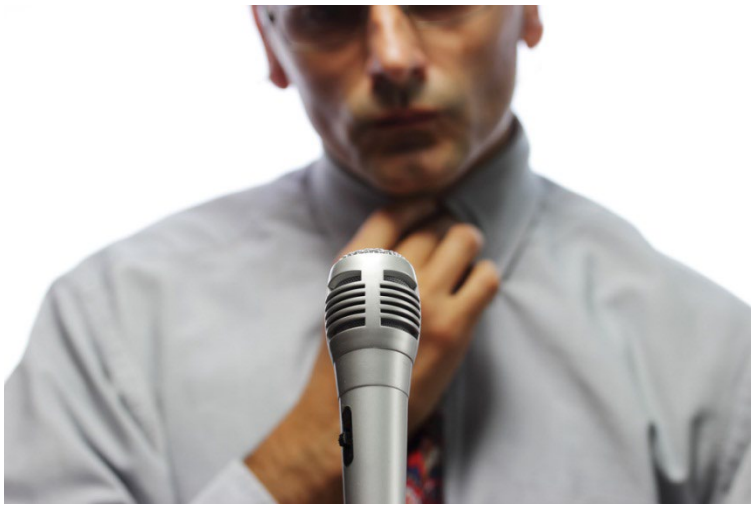
The Deadliest Presentation Mistakes Anyone Can Avoid

October 30, 2014
Bernard Marr



It's fairly inevitable: at some point in your career, you're likely to be asked to make a presentation.

For some, public speaking is an opportunity to shine. For others, it's their worst nightmare come true.

Wherever you fall on the spectrum, knowing these 10 common presentation mistakes — and how to fix them before they happen — can mean the difference between a presentation that's a career maker or a career breaker.

Too much content.

According to presentation guru Paul Vorreiter of ReflectiveSpark.com, your audience should need no more than 3 seconds to read and understand each slide. If they're busy reading the slide, they're not paying attention to what you're saying.

Too many bullet points.

Bullet points don't tell a story, and a slide with 10 bullet points violates the 3 second rule. Instead, try breaking that up into 10 slides with one idea each.

Relying on facts and figures instead of a story.

The biggest mistake most presenters make is not telling a compelling story. Instead of telling your audience that revenue is up 300 percent, try telling the story of how the revenue was grown or what the company is doing with the profits.

Making it all about you.

The audience isn't there to try to read the tiny text on your boring slides. Make the presentation about them! Turn it into an event, something they will want to talk about with others. Do this by knowing who your audience is, what they care about, and what problems keep them up at night.

Too many animations.

Animations are fun for the person programming the presentation, but they don't usually add anything. Keep things simple. Bonus: The fewer bells and whistles your presentation has, the less likely things are to go wrong.

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Too much text.

If you want to create an emotional response in your audience (and yes, you do), use full-screen pictures. Text should just be used for hard facts.

Disorganized presentation.

When tasked with making a presentation, most people open up PowerPoint and start programming. Bad idea. Instead, use sticky notes to storyboard your presentation first. It will save you lots of programming time and make your presentation more organized. Plus, having limited space on a sticky note will help you stick (pun intended) to the 3 second rule.

Never practiced.

The single biggest mistake people make when public speaking or giving a presentation is neglecting to practice enough. Practice by yourself in front of a mirror, practice in front of a colleague or friend. Practice more than you think you should; the more times you've done the presentation, the more smoothly it will go.

Making last minute changes.

It's tempting for everyone to continue making changes right up until they walk on stage, but doing so opens you up for mistakes. Make a rule to lock down your presentation one to two days before, and then don't change another thing.

Technical difficulties.

There's nothing worse than sitting around and waiting for a presenter to figure out how to make the projector work — or worse, listening to a presentation without slides because he couldn't make it work. Be prepared to connect to anything; a few dollars spent up front to buy all the right connectors will save you tons of embarrassment and headache. Know beforehand the kind of projector, the size of the screen, and the layout of the room so you can be prepared for anything.

Eliminating these 10 common mistakes will set you head and shoulders above your unprepared peers when it comes time to make your next presentation, whether you're presenting to a small conference room of your peers or giving your seminal TED talk to an international audience.

About: Bernard Marr is a globally recognized expert in strategy, performance management, analytics, KPIs and big data. He helps companies and executive teams manage, measure and improve performance.

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