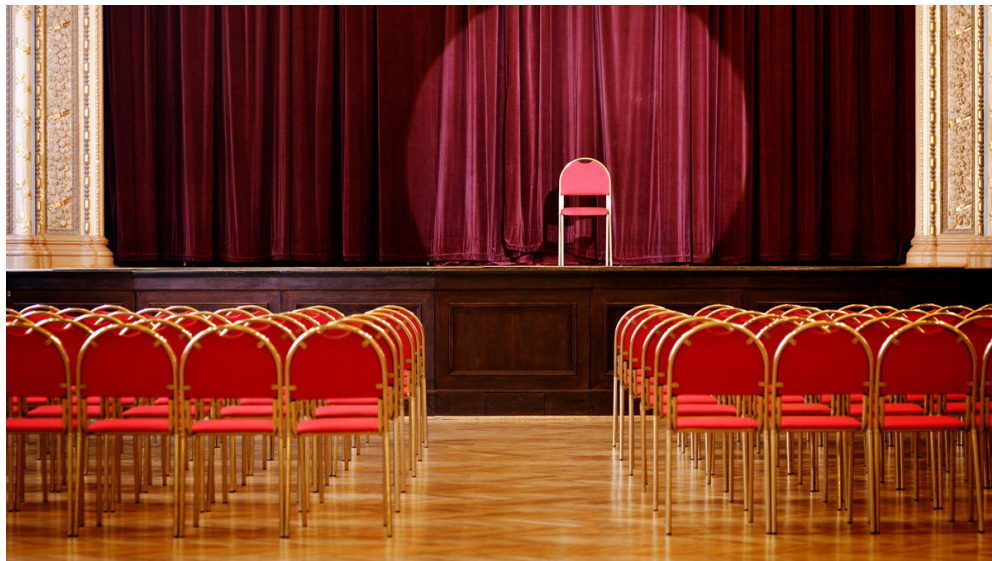




Presentation Skills



Avoid These 3 Pitfalls When Giving a Sales Presentation

Lessons from a study of almost 5,000 sales professionals.
by Terri L. Sjodin

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When you work in sales, no business skill is more essential than effective communication. This is especially true when it comes to giving presentations, whether you are presenting in person, over the telephone, or via a videoconferencing platform. Getting to the point, connecting with others quickly, and making a strong pitch can be the difference between moving a transaction forward or losing an opportunity.

Mastering the art of delivering a great presentation will involve some trial and error. Most people want to improve their presentations but don't know where to start. The challenge is: You can't improve what you don't recognize as a problem.

In a three-phase, multi-year study, we examined the habits of almost 5,000 sales professionals whose livelihoods depend on their ability to build and deliver persuasive presentations. We surveyed both novice and experienced professionals and identified 12 common mistakes that were consistently self-reported among our respondents. If you want to improve your presentation outcomes, having some awareness around the top three can help you recognize and eventually avoid them altogether.

Mistake #1: Being Overly Informative

Have you ever felt like prospective clients seem curious about what you're selling, and maybe even compliment you on giving an informative presentation, but rarely seem to say "yes" or move forward? You're not alone, and you're likely committing this mistake.

Being overly informative is also called data dumping, and it's one of the highest ranked mistakes in our study. Data dumping happens when a speaker overloads a presentation with an excessive amount of information — often without the proper context or explanation. It can sound like this:

- We have been in business for over 100 years.
- We have a wide variety of choices.
- We have a super experienced team of professionals.
- We have great customer service.

While these points might be good to know, they don't efficiently drive decision-making or conversion. Many of the sales professionals we surveyed admitted that this mistake has cost them a win, a deal, or an opportunity.

What to do instead:

Your role, as a sales professional, is to be both informative and persuasive and promote a specific point of view, product, service, cause, or way of thinking. By design, your job requires you to craft a compelling narrative that inspires a listener to want to work with you, your organization, and buy into whatever you're presenting. To do this you'll want to pair rock-solid information with compelling arguments.

When crafting your message, ask yourself: Why does the listener *need* what you provide? Then make a list of your most salient talking points to show the listener *how* you can meet those needs.

For example, let's say you're selling a product or service that can save your prospect time. Saving time is the argument. If you focus on the significant time savings you can bring their organization, and then back up that claim by providing evidence to prove how your product or service increases efficiency, your message will be far more compelling.

This small adjustment will help you present stronger and more relevant arguments that meet the needs of your listeners.

Mistake #2: Failing to Close the Sale

Are you a concluder or a closer? A conclusion is more of a wrap up. A close is a specific call to action: What do you want your listener to do in response to the message you've just shared with them?

Although many professionals are concerned about being perceived as a "hard sell," out of the almost 5,000 participants in the study, 2,336

self-identified that they “concluded but did not close,” meaning they neglect to ask their listeners to take some form of action at the end of their presentation. When the moment arrives, they commit a wide range of missteps that include talking around their close, talking too much, or just thanking the listeners for their time and saying, “If you have any questions or want to move forward, call me.”

“Call me” is not a close.

What to do instead:

Some salespeople balk at the idea of “closing” because they feel that final *ask* is clumsy or awkward. They worry about being seen as pushy, so they leave it out altogether. But the close doesn’t have to be any of those things.

To gracefully close, you need to first acknowledge that asking your prospect to do something is a part of your job. It can be as simple as: “Would you like to move forward with ____?” Then share the next step in the process, whether that’s setting up a next appointment time, signing an agreement, requesting an introduction, or whatever is necessary to keep the relationship progressing.

Mistake #3: Winging It

Winging it is improvising, ad-libbing, or generally conducting a presentation without much preparation. Our study findings show that sales professionals who committed the mistake of “winging it” consistently failed to do three things: prepare, practice, and get into the right frame of mind beforehand. As a result, they appeared disorganized, off-point, and/or ill-prepared in front of the clients they were aiming to connect with and persuade.

Most of us have been guilty of winging it at some point. It often happens when you procrastinate and run out of time. Or it stems from

overconfidence — feeling like you don't need to rehearse or prepare. Whatever its origins, “winging it” rarely yields optimal results.

What to do instead:

Preparation starts well before you walk into your meeting. Examine the opportunity you have been given and identify your goal or intention. As discussed in our first point, you should spend some time focusing on how you can pair your client's needs with your best offering and use this information to build a presentation outline that makes a compelling case.

Practice is essential to a successful performance. Like a stage actor showing up at the theater for a dress rehearsal, make the time to do a run-through. That could mean selecting the clothes you plan to wear during your presentation and running through the complete version for review.

Before you walk into the room on the day of, it's also useful to clear your mind and get your head in the game. Don't just roll in hot. Take a few beats to get focused, and leave distractions at the door.

For example, if you are dealing with personal issues or feeling intimidated about the opportunity or by the person you are meeting with, take a deep breath, visualize a good outcome, and focus your energy and effort on the task at hand. As the saying goes, strive to “starve your distractions and feed your focus.”

This small step makes a significant difference in improving results.

Generate Better Outcomes

Whether you are a novice or seasoned pro, learning vicariously through others can help you quickly evaluate challenges in your presentations and make simple corrections that can expand your influence and

generate better outcomes. We all have good days and bad days, and that's okay. You don't have to be perfect to be effective. The message here is to be presentation ready.

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