



Business Communication



How to Present to a Small Audience

The rules are different. **by JD Schramm**

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It's easy to associate delivering presentations with standing in front of an audience and gesturing toward projected slides. However, many meetings or pitches involve fewer than ten participants in a room, where everyone remains seated and walks through the same slide deck together. This is quite a different scenario with greater constraints on the presenter and fewer tools to engage the audience. But thoughtful planning and awareness of nonverbal cues can make these “non-presentations” successful.

When preparing for a seated presentation, certain tools like a lectern, projector, or microphone may not be readily available, as they might if you were presenting in front of the room. Shift your focus by asking yourself these six questions:

How do you prepare your printed deck? It is important to work from the same printed deck (with the same page numbers) as the audience. When you assemble your deck, use a limited number of handwritten notes (possibly even in light pencil), so you don't appear overly reliant on them. One colleague shared that when she had forgotten her own deck the pitch went particularly well. She had more of a conversation when she wasn't bound to her script. If you can't project your slides, bring a set with you on a USB stick, or email a PDF to yourself as a backup.

How do you prepare the deck for your audience? Make it easy for people to follow what you're saying by guiding them directly to each slide. Use highlights or sticky notes to emphasize important sections. Or try purposefully leaving something blank that you wish to have the audience fill in. My first sales job was in grad school selling advertising on a desk blotter that was given to college students. My mentor showed me that if I provided a "mini-mock up" of the calendar and quoted the prices to prospective advertisers, most of them would write down the prices as I spoke. When they later looked back at the document, with their own handwriting on it, it formed a more lasting impression.

What else should you bring with you? Since typically every member of the audience will have their own copy of the deck, I try to bring one item that everybody will look at together for at least a portion of the presentation. One group of executives I trained from Rabobank in the Netherlands had to deliver an update to senior leaders on their three-week fact-finding trip in California. Rather than print a small map of the state in each person's deck, they instead unfolded a large AAA roadmap in the middle of the conference table and marked it up as they went through the presentation, showing the various stops on their trip. Clients of mine who work in architecture or real estate development often bring a floor plan and several sheets of clear acetate

when reviewing building or site plans, so the decision makers can sketch what they hope to see in the next iteration.

When should you stand? Nonverbal experts agree that if you can stand, while others remain seated, you gain some power. So decide if you can stand for the more formal portion of the pitch and then sit to field questions. Should this prove too awkward or out-of-the-norm, consider standing for only a few moments. Perhaps stand to illustrate something on the whiteboard or flip-chart, then remain on your feet for a bit longer, as you facilitate some comments about what you've just illustrated.

Where should you sit? Seating should not be accidental. If you are the primary presenter, take a position beside or at a corner adjacent to the decision-maker. Research shows that if you share a corner or side of the table with the decision-maker, it will be easier to reach an agreement. Conversely, the most adversarial position (think of a chess game) is directly opposite someone. Try to sit where you can maximize eye contact. Sitting near the end of a long board table lets you easily see the majority of the people in the room (and avoids the tennis match position where you must turn your head whenever a person speaks from each end of the table). Choose a seat that minimizes the barriers between you and the audience. In a room where you regularly present, you may readily know which seat provides you the greatest nonverbal advantage; in an unfamiliar space, you have to quickly decide what's the best option. When you are on a team for a presentation, enter the room in a way that allows the person with the greatest speaking role to select her/his seat first.

When should you distribute the pitch book? Delay this if possible. Take some time to talk about the audience's goals and hopes for the meeting before you begin. Once they have their slide decks, you will be

competing for their attention. Your initial read of the audience can also help you guide them directly to the parts of your material that matters most to them.

Aside from these five questions, it's also important to consider the effect of your voice and your gestures – just as in a standing presentation. When seated, we still need to breathe fully from the diaphragm and speak with a strong voice. Make sure that those furthest from you can clearly hear you. Being seated allows for a more conversational and informal tone, but don't become too relaxed, or you may lose your edge as an authority. Be sure both feet are firmly planted on the floor with your weight evenly distributed. Lean just slightly forward when you are speaking, so your audience sees your engagement with them. Some experts suggest relaxing this slightly when taking questions – sink back into the chair a bit so you appear approachable during the Q&A. Make eye contact with each person in the room, and sustain it for four to seven seconds per person, or longer if there are fewer people. Men and women face different obstacles non-verbally, as Amy Cuddy shares in her [2012 TED Talk](#). Knowing our personal predisposition in terms of space use, gestures, and nonverbal communication can be a great start to maximizing your non-verbal power.

Ultimately, it comes down to being thoughtful and strategic. When communicating from a seated position, success depends on your relationship with the audience and how well you can engage them within certain constraints. If you think about it, we all present much more often than we realize. We need to be conscious of how we can deliver our best, even when we're sitting down.

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