Harvard Business Review | Digital Article

Presentation Skills

Good Presentations Need to Make People Uncomfortable

Being persuasive starts with cognitive dissonance. **by Josh Bersin**

Good Presentations Need to Make People Uncomfortable

Being persuasive starts with cognitive dissonance. **by Josh Bersin**

Published on HBR.org / September 09, 2016 / Reprint H033UV

Tim Gouw

It's no secret that our digital communication tools are overwhelming us. A Deloitte study found that U.S. workers (in aggregate) look at their phones almost 8 billion times a day, and research shows that U.S. productivity has waned since the introduction of the smartphone. But the world of business needs a way to bring people together to share information and explain ideas, and to get them to reach for the same goals. So what's the happy medium we're looking for?

I'm going to suggest a classic, underappreciated solution: presentations. They often get a bad rap because they're often badly made. A good one takes many hours to build: It requires research and clarity of thinking, and great care must be given to word choice, image selection, and flow. Yet when we do that important work, presentations can help us do something more effectively than almost any other communication tool at our disposal (which is saying a lot, because there are many). They enable us to make a compelling, persuasive argument — without overwhelming people with disjointed messages or a fire hose of information.

When I was on the high school debate team in the 1970s, we studied the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance, and I've since used it to create thousands of speeches and inspirational talks. The idea behind it is very simple: If you want a group of people to adopt your point of view, start by describing some difficult or painful issue they're faced with. Maybe it's a problem they didn't realize they had, or maybe it's something they recognize as an ongoing challenge. Either way, you're forcing them to hold two contradictory things in their minds at once: either what they already believe and what you're telling them, or what they know and how they behave. That dissonance ratchets up their discomfort, which makes them want to fix it. From there, you move to your explanation of the problem, and then to your proposed solution, which will replace the dissonance with harmony.

That basic formula can work effectively whether you're articulating a new strategy at a staff meeting, pitching a product to a customer, or bringing up an issue for discussion with your team. In all these situations, you are trying to explain your idea, sell it to the audience, and ask people to change their views or take some sort of action. As presentation expert Nancy Duarte has pointed out, you are essentially creating a story, one that sets up a problem, suggests a solution, tells the

audience what they should do, and describes how they'll be better off as a result.

One of the very best teachers I ever had in business, a technical guru at IBM, used this approach in his training sessions with employees. He told lots of stories about customers and the daunting challenges they faced. In each story he would set up the problem, describe the painful symptoms (slow response time, for example), and explain all the gyrations the customer went through to figure out what was wrong. Then, like Sherlock Holmes, he would tell us how to diagnose the real issue and — "aha!" — fix it. We learned all about problem solving, architecture, and, of course, IBM's products. His training sessions were master classes in the art of presenting.

Once you understand this approach, you can see it applied in TED talks, keynote speeches, instructional videos, blogs, articles, and almost every other form of persuasive communication out there. Unlike the "instant on" communication in Twitter, or even email, presentations give you time and room to make your case and — with help from your voice, face, and gestures — convince people that they should respond to your call to action.

You can also layer on lots of beautiful pictures and graphics to grab people's attention, but visual candy does not substitute for a strong argument and a compelling story. I may find your images engaging, but if they don't tell me what to do or what I must learn, I may just remember your talk as a "good presentation," and never take any action as a result.

Above all, a well-crafted presentation gets people to focus their attention and their efforts. And focus is something we all desperately

need when so many other tools are distracting us instead of making us more productive.

This article was originally published online on September 09, 2016.

Josh Bersin is founder and CEO of human capital advisory firm The Josh Bersin Company. He is a global research analyst, public speaker, and writer on the topics of corporate human resources, talent management, recruiting, leadership, technology, and the intersection between work and life.

