SMARTER THAN THE AVERAGE GUIDE

HBR Guide to

Persuasive Presentations

Inspire action
Engage the audience
Sell your ideas

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Section 1

Audience

Designing a presentation without an audience in mind is like writing a love letter and addressing it “to whom it may concern.”

—Ken Haemer,

Presentation Research Manager, AT&T

Understand the Audience’s Power

When you walk into a room as a presenter, it’s easy to feel as if you’re in a position of power: You’re up front, perhaps even elevated on a stage, and people came to hear you speak. In reality, though, you’re not the star of the show. The audience is.

Why? The people you’re addressing will determine whether your idea spreads or dies, simply by embracing or rejecting it. You need them more than they need you. Since they have that control, it’s crucial to be humble in your approach. Use their desires and goals as a filter for everything you present.

Presenters tend to be self-focused. They have a lot to say, they want to say it well, and they have little time to prepare. These pressures make them forget what’s important to the audience. A self-focused presenter might just describe a new initiative and explain what needs to get done—outlining how to do it, when to do it, and the budget required. Then maybe, if the audience is lucky, he’ll have a slide at the very end about “why it matters.” This format screams, “I pay you to do this, so just do it!” The presenter is so consumed by the mission that he forgets to say why people would want or need to be involved.

Spend a moment in your audience’s shoes. Walk people through why the initiative matters to them and to the organization, what internal and external factors are driving it, and why their support will make it successful. Yes, get through the nitty-gritty details, but set up the valuable role they’ll play in the scenario rather than dictate a laundry list of to-do’s.

Though presentations and audiences vary, one important fact remains constant: The people in your audience came to see what you can do for them, not what they must do for you. So look at the audience as the “hero” of your idea—and yourself as the mentor who helps people see themselves in that role so they’ll want to get behind your idea and propel it forward.

Think of Yoda—a classic example of a wise, humble mentor. In the *Star Wars* movies, he gives the hero, Luke Skywalker, a special gift (a deeper understanding of the “Force”), trains him to use a magical tool (the lightsaber), and helps him in his fight against the Empire.

Like Yoda and other mentors in mythology, presenters should:

- **Give the hero a special gift:** Give people insights that will improve their lives. Perhaps you introduce senior managers at your company to an exciting new way to compete in the marketplace. Or maybe you show a roomful of potential clients that you can save them money and time.

- **Teach the hero to use a “magical” tool:** This is where the people in your audience pick up a new skill or mind-set from you—something that enables them to reach their objectives *and* yours.

- **Help the hero get “unstuck”:** Ideally, you’ll come with an idea or a solution that gets the audience out of a difficult or painful situation.

So if you’re gearing up to launch a new service offering, for example, give your team a clear roadmap (tool) and a promise to bring in consultants for training and support (gift)—and describe how these will help everyone rise to the challenge ahead.

Segment the Audience

If you see your audience as a homogenous, faceless clump of people, you'll have a hard time making a connection and moving them to action. Instead, think of them as a line of individuals waiting to have a conversation with you.

Your audience will usually include a mix of people—individuals in diverse roles, with various levels of decision-making authority, from different parts of the organization—each needing to hear your message for different reasons. Decide which subgroup is the most important to you, and zero in on that subgroup's needs when you develop your presentation.

When you're segmenting your audience, take a look at:

- **Politics:** Power, influence, decision process
- **Demographics:** Age, education, ethnicity, gender, and geography
- **Psychographics:** Personality, values, attitudes, interests, communities, and lifestyle
- **Firmographics:** Number of employees, revenue size, industry, number of locations, location of headquarters
- **Ethnographics:** Social and cultural needs

After you've segmented the group, figure out which members will have the greatest impact on the adoption of your idea. Is there a layer of management you need to appeal to? Is there a type of customer in the room with a lot of sway over the industry?

Then view yourself as a curator of content for your most valuable and powerful stakeholders. Pick the one type of person in the room with the most influence, and write your presentation as if just to that subgroup. The presentation can't be so specialized that it will alienate everyone else—you'll need some content that appeals to the greater group. But tailor most of your specifics to the subgroup you've targeted.

Say you're presenting a new product concept to the executive team, and you know you won't get their buy-in unless Trent, the president of the enterprise division, gets excited about the idea, because they always defer to his instincts on new initiatives. Appeal first to Trent's entrepreneurial nature by describing how exciting the new market is—while keeping in mind what the other executives will care about. Here's where your segmentation work will come in handy (table 1–1).

Draw on your understanding of the team members as you prepare your talk. In addition to fanning the flames of Trent's entrepreneurism, for example, have data in your pocket to respond to Marco, the analytical and risk-averse CTO, when he inevitably balks. And try to work with, not against, your CMO's arrogance: Ask for his counsel on a key marketing point or two before the group meets, and he'll be less likely to lash out during the presentation or sit there quietly plotting a coup, as is his wont.

TABLE 1-1

Segmenting your audience

Executive team member	Qualities
Bert, CEO	Hierarchical, micromanager, dominant, fear-driven, needs to be liked
Carol, president of Consumer division	Visionary, creative, disruptive, scattered, wants to stand on own feet
Trent, president of	Entrepreneurial, design thinker, systematic, found self after

Enterprise division	near-death experience
Martin, CMO	CEO’s favorite, empirically minded, arrogant, sabotages projects
Marco, CTO	Political, risk-averse, analytical, introverted, has self-doubt

What if some audience members are already familiar with your idea and others need to be brought up to speed? (This is most likely to happen when you’re presenting within your organization.) Consider evening things out by giving the newbies a crash course before you conduct the larger presentation. Or you may decide just to do two separate presentations.

Present Clearly and Concisely to Senior Executives

Senior executives are a tough segment to reach. They usually have very little time in their schedules to give you. Though that's true of many audiences, what sets this crowd apart is that they need to make huge decisions based on accurate information delivered quickly. Long presentations with a big reveal at the end do not work for them. They'll want you to get to the bottom line right away—and they often won't let you finish your shtick without interrupting. (Never mind that you would have answered their questions if they'd just let you get through the next three slides.)

When presenting to an audience of senior executives, do everything you can to make their decision making easier and more efficient:

- **Get to the point:** Take less time than you were allocated. If you were given 30 minutes, create your talk within that timeframe but then pretend that your slot got cut to 5 minutes. That'll force you to be succinct and lead with the things they care about—high-level findings, conclusions, recommendations, your call to action. Hit those points clearly and simply before you venture into supporting data or tangential areas of importance to you.

- **Give them what they asked for:** Stay on topic. If you were invited to give an update about the flooding of the manufacturing plant in Indonesia, do that before covering anything else. They've invited you because they felt you could supply a missing piece of information, so answer that specific request quickly.

- **Set expectations:** At the beginning, let the audience know you will spend the first 5 of your 30 minutes presenting your summary and the remaining time on discussion. Most executives will be patient for 5 minutes and let you present your main points well if they know they'll be able to ask questions fairly soon.

- **Create executive summary slides:** Develop a clear, short overview of your key points, and place it in a set of executive summary slides at the front of the deck; have the rest of your slides serve as an appendix. Follow a 10% rule of thumb: If your appendix is 50 slides, devote about 5 slides to your summary at the beginning. After you present the summary, let the group drive the conversation. Often, executives will want to go deeper on the points that will aid their decision making. You can quickly pull up any slides in the appendix that speak to those points.

- **Rehearse:** Before presenting, run your slides by someone who has success getting ideas adopted at the executive level and who will serve as an honest coach. Is your message coming through clearly and quickly? Do your summary slides boil everything down into skimmable key insights? Are you missing anything your audience is likely to expect?

Sounds like a lot of work, right? It is, but presenting to an executive team is a great honor and can open tremendous doors. If you nail this, people with a lot of influence will become strong advocates for your ideas.

Get to Know Your Audience

Segmenting your audience members politically, demographically, psychographically, and so on is a great start, but connecting with people means understanding them on a more personal level. To develop resonant content for them, dig for deeper insights about them. Ask yourself:

- **What are they like?** Think through a day in their lives. Describe what that looks like so they'll know you "get" them.

- **Why are they here?** What do they think they're going to get out of this presentation? Are they willing participants or mandatory attendees? Highlight what's in it for them.

- **What keeps them up at night?** Everyone has a fear, a pain point, a thorn in the side. Let your audience know that you empathize—and that you're here to help.

- **How can you solve their problems?** How are you going to make their lives better? Point to benefits you know they'll care about.

- **What do you want them to do?** What's their part in your plan? Make sure there's a clear action for your audience to take. (See "Build an Effective Call to Action" in the Message section of this guide.)

- **How might they resist?** What will keep them from adopting your message and carrying out your call to action? Remove any obstacles you can.

- **How can you best reach them?** How do they prefer to receive information? Do they like the room to be set up a certain way? Do they want materials to review before the presentation? Afterward? What atmosphere or type of media will best help them see your point of view? Give them what they want, how they want it.

When getting ready to present to an audience you've never met, do some research online. If you know the names of stakeholders in your audience, look up their bios. If you know only generalities about the audience, find the event on social media feeds and read what's on the minds of those who'll be attending. If you'll be presenting to a company, find recent press mentions, look at how the company positions itself against competitors, read its annual report, and have Google Alerts send new articles about the company to your e-mail.

One time, I was preparing to present to beer executives, and I don't like beer or know anything about the industry. So I hosted a beer-tasting event at my shop, read their annual report, read recent press, studied key influencers, and looked up each attendee online. During the Q&A, a question came from one of the top executives (I knew he was at the top because I'd looked him up)—and I answered his question with timely examples.

When your audience is familiar—say, a group of your direct reports or colleagues—think through the pressures they are under and find ways to create an empathic connection.

Knowing people—*really* knowing them—makes it easier to influence them. You engage in a conversation, exchange insights, tell stories. Usually, both you and they change a bit in the process.

People don't fall asleep during conversations, but they often do during presentations—and that's because many presentations don't *feel conversational.* Knowing your audience well helps you feel warmly toward the people in the room and take on a more conversational tone. Speak sincerely to your audience, and people will want to listen to your message and root for and contribute to the success of your idea.

Define How You'll Change the Audience

When you present, you're asking the people in the room to change their behavior or beliefs in some way, big or small. Before you begin writing your presentation, map out that transformation—where your audience is starting, and where you want people to end up. This is the most critical step in planning your presentation, because that desired endpoint is the whole reason you're presenting in the first place, and people won't get there on their own.

Ask yourself, "What new beliefs do I want them to adopt? How do I want them to behave differently? How must their attitudes or emotions change before their behavior can change?"

By thinking through who they are before they enter the room and who you want them to be when they leave, you'll define their transformation arc, much as a screenwriter plans the protagonist's transformation in a film.

Let's say you work in the development office at a university and you're delivering a presentation to potential donors. The audience transformation might look like the one shown in table 1-2.

TABLE 1-2

Transforming your audience

Move audience from:	Move audience to:
Skepticism that the school will make good use of the money	Excitement about innovative research by faculty, students, and alumni—and an impulse to give

Change typically doesn't happen without a struggle. It's hard to convince people to move away from a view that is comfortable or widely held as true, or change a behavioral pattern that has become their norm. You are persuading members of your audience to let go of old beliefs or habits and adopt new ones. Once you understand their transformation, you can demonstrate empathy for the sacrifices they may need to make to move your idea forward.

Find Common Ground

Whether you evoke frenzied enthusiasm or puzzled stares or glassy-eyed boredom depends largely on how well your message resonates with the audience.

Resonance is a physics phenomenon. If you tap into an object's natural rate of vibration, or *resonant frequency,* it will move: It may vibrate, shudder, or even play a sympathetic musical note—think tuning forks. The same is true, metaphorically, when you present to an audience. If you tap into the group's resonant frequency, you can *move* the people listening to you.

But how do you resonate deeply enough to move them toward your objective? Figure out where you have common ground, and communicate on that frequency. Think about what's inside them that's also inside you. That way, you're not pushing or pulling them; they're moving because you tapped into something they already believe.

All this may sound highly unscientific and touchy-feely, but you can find your audience's resonant frequency by doing a little research. You'll want to examine:

- **Shared experiences:** What from your past do you have in common. Do you share memories, historical events, interests?

- **Common goals:** Where are you all headed in the future? What types of outcomes are mutually desired?

- **Qualifications:** Why are you uniquely qualified to be the audience's guiding expert? What did you learn when you faced similar challenges of your own, and how will your audience benefit from that insight?

The amount of common ground you discover will depend on the depth of your relationship with the group.

Lots of common ground

If you are presenting to family, friends, club members, or a religous group, it's easy to find common ground because you know the people well and tend to share many experiences, interests, and values.

Moderate common ground

With your colleagues, the challenge is a bit tougher. You know them a bit, but not as much as close friends or relatives. You share some interests but possibly only around one or two things. Examine those points of intersection for a way in.

Let's say you're a scientist working for a biotech company and you've been asked to speak at an all-hands meeting. Most of the audience members will be scientists, but you'll also be addressing executives and administrative employees. To find common ground with them, think about why you decided to work for this company and what motivates you to do your job day to day. Maybe you wanted to use your research and problem-solving skills to help people stay healthy—a mission the others in the room will share or at least support. Finding such commonalities will help you connect with them.

Minimal common ground

With a broad audience—for instance, a group of seminar participants from a variety of organizations and industries—you'll have many types of people to think about. The overlap won't be immediately evident, because there are so many perspectives and backgrounds to consider. You'll need to work hard to find or create it, but that work will pay off.

Before I went to China on a book tour, for example, I researched communication and storytelling in modern and ancient Chinese culture. I identified three great communicators in Chinese history and analyzed their speeches. When I shared my analysis with audiences, it was clear to them that I understood the historical context surrounding the speeches

—I could even provide detailed answers to their questions about it. I got feedback multiple times on that trip that people could see I cared enough to really study and understand their perspective.