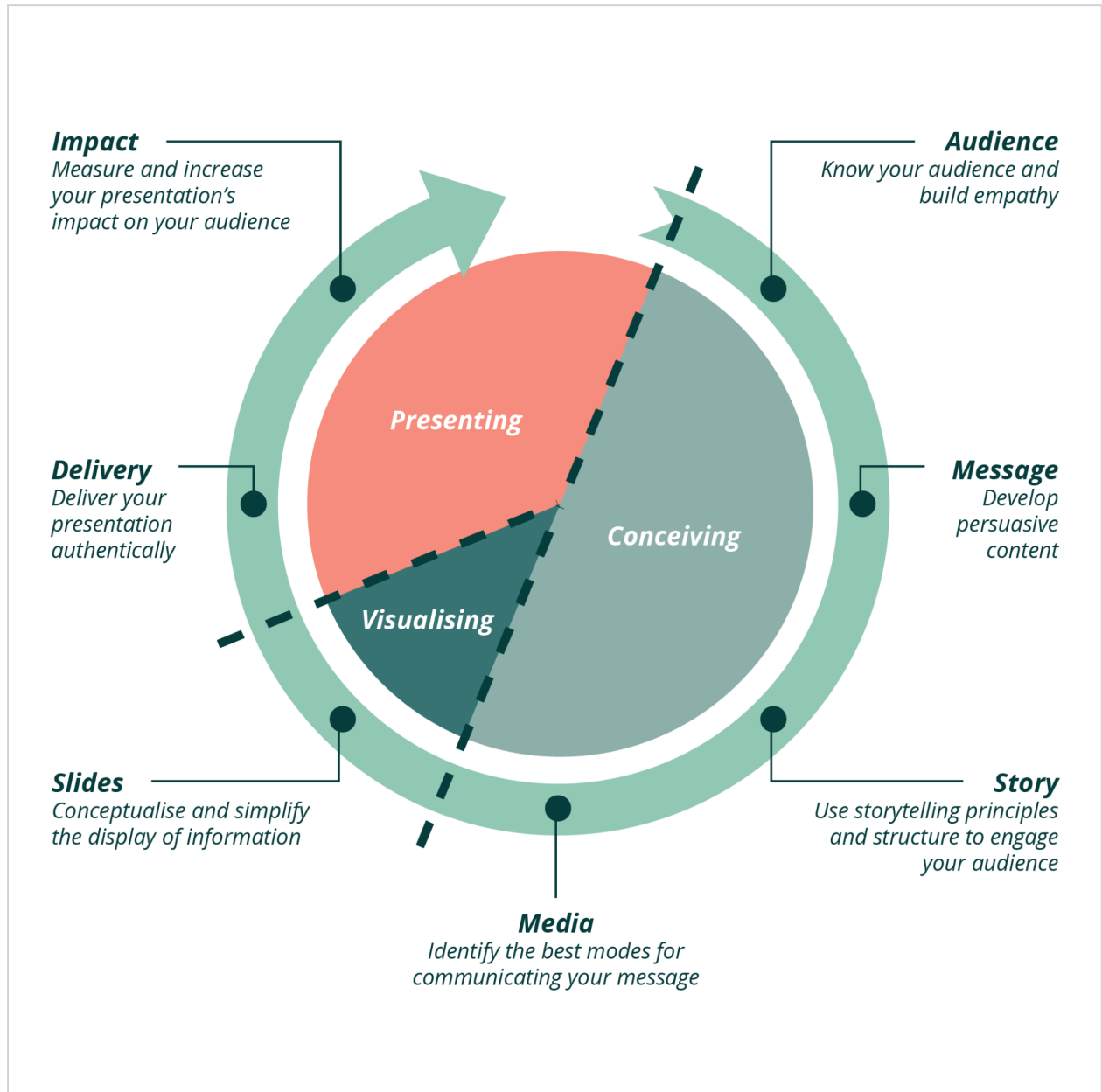# Presenting to Stakeholders

There are many resources that offer guidance on creating and delivering effective presentations. Here we will explore a seven-step approach developed by communications expert Nancy Duarte.[1] She emphasises the importance of understanding your audience, crafting compelling content and delivering your message authentically.

Impact
Measure and increase your presentation's impact on your audience

Audience
Know your audience and build empathy

Delivery
Deliver your presentation authentically

Message
Develop persuasive content

Presenting

Conceiving

Visualising

Slides
Conceptualise and simplify the display of information

Story
Use storytelling principles and structure to engage your audience

Media
Identify the best modes for communicating your message

Seven steps cycle, N. Duarte, HBR guide to persuasive presentations

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[1] Duarte, N. (2012). HBR guide to persuasive presentations. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

1. Know your audience and build empathy

To connect with your audience, it's essential to understand their needs, concerns and motivations. This way, you can tailor your message to resonate with their experiences and emotions. By showing empathy and understanding your audience's perspective, you're more likely to build rapport and make your presentation more persuasive.

It is particularly important to craft your presentation to meet the needs of your stakeholders – and this means recognising what they need to know and how they like to receive their information. For example, Duarte recommends that if you are presenting to senior executives, you should get to the point quickly and then give them time to discuss the content and ask questions.

Moreover, if you have insights about how certain individuals in the audience are likely to react to your presentation, prepare for this in advance. For instance, if you are presenting to an analytical CEO who likes to interrogate the evidence before making business decisions, make sure you have data to back up your points.

2. Develop persuasive content

Once you've established a connection with your audience, focus on developing persuasive content. This involves crafting a clear and concise message that is easy to understand and supporting it with compelling evidence and examples.

For Duarte, the key here is to define and convey your 'big idea' – that is, the key message you want your audience to take away with them. She says this has two components:

- **Your point of view** – the 'big idea' needs to express your perspective on the subject, not just broad generalisations. Why is it important to you?
- **What's at stake** – why should the audience value and buy into your 'big idea'?

Duarte puts it as follows. "When asked 'what's your presentation about?', most people answer with a phrase like 'software updates'. That's not a big idea; it's a topic – no point of view, no stakes. Change it to 'your department needs to update its workflow management software', and you're getting closer. You've added your point of view, but the stakes still aren't clear. So try this instead: 'your department will struggle to meet key production deadlines until we update the workflow management software.'"

3. Use storytelling principles and structure to engage your audience

Construct your presentation so that it has a clear beginning, middle and end. To do this, you can use storytelling techniques to create a narrative that resonates with your audience and builds suspense and anticipation. Keeping your audience engaged throughout the presentation increases the likelihood that they will remember your message.

For example, you could begin your presentation with a compelling 'hook' that grabs the audience's attention. This could be an intriguing statistic, a thought-provoking question or a personal anecdote that sets the stage for the rest of your talk. As you move into the body of your presentation, use clear transitions to guide your audience through the key points. Conclude with a strong call to action that encourages your listeners to take a specific next step. This will reinforce the main message of your presentation and leave a lasting impression on your audience.

Duarte provides the following short example:

Point you want to make: Every cross-divisional function could benefit from a steering committee

Story about organisational change:

- **Beginning:** A few years ago, the sales team tackled a cross-divisional problem with the help of a steering committee.
- **Middle:** At the time, all sales groups were independent. This meant that we were confusing customers with many different rules, procedures and formats. So we decided to create a sales steering committee. You may be able to imagine how hard it was to reach agreement on every single point.
- **End**: But we agreed to meet every two weeks to find common ground. Over the next year, we standardised all of our processes and learned a lot from each other. Customers became much happier with our service.

4. Identify the best modes for communicating your message

Determine which communication modes will be most effective for conveying your message – a formal presentation with a slide deck may not always be the right choice. You should always take into account your audience's preferences. For example, a group of analysts may prefer a detailed report, while those in creative roles might respond better to a video or in-person demonstration.

Duarte points out that if you do opt for a presentation, you should remember that they are no longer limited to a single place or time – they can be streamed or downloaded to be accessed at a time that suits your audience. And presentations don't always have to include slides. You can use videos, flipcharts, audio clips and even props – "pretty much anything that will help people to receive your message".

5. Conceptualise and simplify the display of information

Use visual aids to enhance your message and make it more memorable. This includes keeping your visuals simple and uncluttered and using consistent design elements to create a cohesive presentation. By displaying information effectively, you can help your audience to understand and remember your key points.

According to Duarte, "audiences can process only one stream of information at a time. They'll either listen to you speak or read your slides – they won't do both simultaneously". This means that you must make sure that any visuals can be comprehended quickly. Duarte's tips for creating slides that people can understand in just a few seconds include:

- Only add elements when you have a **good reason** – does every slide need the company logo, for example?
- Keep any **text short** and easy to skim read
- Make the **text as large as you can**, so that people at the back of the room – if applicable – can see it
- Select **one type face** – or two at most – for the entire slide deck
- Use a **consistent colour scheme** throughout
- **Align graphics and text blocks** so that slides appear neat and tidy, rather than disjointed

6. Deliver your presentation authentically

There are several practical steps you can take to help your presentation run smoothly. For example, you should practise your presentation several times to build confidence and facilitate a straightforward delivery. Characteristics here include speaking clearly and confidently, and using body language and gestures to emphasise your points.

Duarte also suggests that you should get to know the venue in which you will be presenting, perhaps by visiting in advance or looking for details online. And you should anticipate potential technological difficulties, such as laptop or projector failures, and be prepared for them by testing equipment before you present. In addition, bring back-up options for crucial items and identify who is responsible for technical support should things go wrong.

Beyond these more functional tips, Duarte emphasises the importance of delivering your presentation authentically. This means "being yourself". She explains, "Transparency wins people over. Although you'll want to come across as smart and articulate, it's even more important to be open and sincere so people will trust you and your ideas". So, if you have personal stories that are relevant to your subject, use them. If you feel emotional about your topic, show it. By being authentic, you can connect with your audience on a deeper level and make a lasting impression.

7. Measure and increase your presentation's impact on your audience

After delivering your presentation, gather feedback from your audience to assess its effectiveness. Use this feedback to improve your future presentations and continuously aim to make them more impactful and persuasive. By measuring and increasing the impact of your presentations, you can achieve your goals and influence your audience.

Duarte suggests using social media channels to gather feedback in real time by monitoring topics with hashtags or creating dedicated discussion groups. Of course, these tips mainly apply to

presentations you might give at public events – but the same principles could be used for internal presentations if you have access to instant-messaging platforms or forums on your company intranet.

Other practical steps you can take to help reinforce your message include sending follow-up messages to people who asked questions and distributing any materials you promised to your audience – such as copies of your slides. And, if your presentation is a prelude to further work, you could book in 'next steps' meetings with key stakeholders.