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Rudolf Strutz

12 ways to ruin your presentation

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1st edition

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ISBN 978-87-403-1027-6

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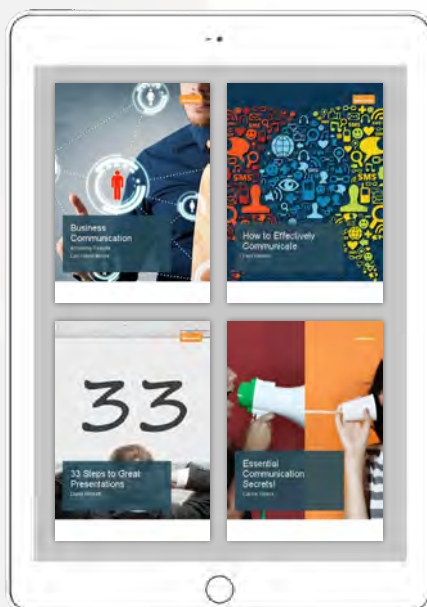


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Introduction

An unlimited number of how-to books try to guide you to making your presentation more successful. Many of those companions provide tips and tricks with the promise that they will make your presentation livelier, technically refined and more impressive. Today's abundance of technical possibilities open paths to us we couldn't even think of taking in the past, with our projectors and print slides. Even though we can't drop all those slides anymore, which was always a great thing considering how it messed with the order of the slides, modern technology offers even better ways of producing one fine chaos.

This book is not a guide to improve your presentations – it's a guide how to give a presentation that will stick in your and the audience's memory for a long time. Contrary to all those promises in how-to books, I can guarantee you that you will not leave a positive impression on your listeners.

A companion to help you turn every single presentation into a catastrophe should simply show you that the line between success and failure is pretty fine. A dozen of guidelines is all you have to follow to ruin even the most interesting topic and mark your presentation as quite a special "performance."

1 Preparation

There are two approaches to how to prepare for a speech or presentation, and they are completely opposed to each other. Either version gives you the opportunity to make your appearance a unique and nerve-racking experience. There's on the one hand the "freethinker", the one who just steps in front of their audience and just begins to talk a mile a minute without any preparation at all; on the other hand there's the "reader" who leaves nothing to chance – everything's well thought through and jotted down.

1.1 Freethinker

The first tip already saves you a lot of time and especially a hard time, because who really needs preparation for something like a speech or presentation? Indeed, freethinkers are in danger of missing their point during talking, but if your audience is unable to follow you, it's not really your problem, is it?

Experts in their field, freethinkers could talk for hours on end, give examples and, most of all, talk without notes. You know everything and if anybody has a question to ask, you are the one with the grasp of the topic. That what the freethinker has already forgotten, many in the audience have yet to learn. Therefore: preparation is for noobs, not for pros. If you know your field that well, there's really nothing to say against some improvising.

And don't forget that whatever isn't interesting to you, is probably not that interesting to the audience either. Freethinkers talk about what they're interested in themselves.

1.2 Readers

The reader is much more precise, yet still very chaotic. Any such presentation is getting even funnier if the reader is not only handling their notes – which he needs – but also something else. Make the reader's day by giving them a microphone. With the presenter having to focus on their written concept, the computer, the screen, the audience and the microphone, presentations like that are somewhat reminiscent of a cabaret show.

So, if you read off the paper, it might happen that you lose the line. Don't panic, just start from the beginning, the audience loves stunts. Make your reading really monotonous and it will get the more exciting for your listeners. Always keep in mind that you're not an actor, therefore you don't have to worry about emphasis. Content is king, so don't be a serf to presentation skills.

2 Technology

As one result of the advance of technology, today presentations are prepared and especially held with the help of computer software only. It doesn't matter whether the presenter has used Windows or Apple, whether they used a PC, tablet or smartphone. The kind of software is not important here, but what you have managed to create with the program counts.

You don't like surprises and saved the presentation on your own device or medium. From a technological point of view, you are well-prepared. Fortunately, there are still quite a few ways it could end in a technical knock-out. For example, the projector might not be able to show your presentation because the resolution isn't good enough or because you picked the wrong format.

But if you're one of those people who just save everything on a flash drive, installation could really thwart your presentation – because who said the computer you wanted to use to show your presentation accepts alien flash drives?

Almost an evergreen and the emergency cord you could pull to ruin your presentation at last, can be found in the plug for the projector. It need not even be a MacBook with another port that does not fit; many smaller notebooks use smaller ports for spatial reasons. There are of course adapter units for all cases, but who knows if you have it on hand at the time of your presentation. Also, if you forgot your charger at home, the whole problem gets so much the bigger and could shorten your presentation immensely.

3 Last Second

Computers are nothing but gadgets, without any soul or life. Many users, however, blame their own simply faulty operation on the ostensibly crazy computer. If a chef can't follow a recipe, they can hardly blame it on the cooking utensils.

Making alterations to your presentation only seconds before you're on might work out just fine – but there is a chance it will bring about a problem. Not only can you yourself tinker with your presentation, you could also ask friends, acquaintances or colleagues to quickly change something.

“Just this one thing”, are usually the last words before the catastrophe sets in.

4 Internet and Links

Also professionals often come down with many ideas for their presentations, creating shortcuts with external data, providing web links and integrating videos. Of course, all of that works during rehearsal and in your own office. But what if you're holding your presentation at the customer's or in a hotel, and you neither access to the internet nor to your external data?

Some folks don't want to risk anything and use their own internet. Thanks to today's high-speed connections even on mobile devices, we can go online everywhere and thus also use data from our own networks. Fortunately, there is always the remaining possibility that you can't reach your own server, or that your own firewall denies access. Another interesting problem proves the possibility of there simply not being any connection at all.

5 The Challenge

You have followed some of this book's guidelines and now it's finally there: the moment of your presentation. Some flaws just can't be disguised, for example when the projector just won't act reasonably.

Most importantly, you have to stay calm and show your audience whose fault this is really. Maybe you have to come up with some innovative lie here, but professionals will always find someone to lie the blame on.

Whenever you're having a fight with technology right in front of a (waiting) audience, use this opportunity to show how high your stress threshold is and how coolly you handle such dead-end situations.



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6 Presentation Contents

You've got a goal and that is to bring across as much information as possible. If you prepare a lot of slide, you will also be able to show a lot.

6.1 Your Own or Somebody Else's Presentation

It's always incredibly exciting to show a presentation you have not prepared yourself – especially if there have been some alterations just before you're on. It's like being captain of a ship you have just put out to sea, but without knowing your destination, route or anything else – and with your crew awaiting instructions.

Some presentations feel exactly like that: the captain doesn't even seem to know whether it's a ship or plane they're manoeuvring.

6.2 Gimmicks

There are presentations in which content becomes absolutely negligible, but everyone is wondering which effect to use for the next slide. There are unlimited possibilities and, to make things even more exciting, providers of presentation kits also offer sound effects, videos, as well as growing and jumping graphics.

As the author of your presentation you have a bottomless source at your disposal to emphasise your technical abilities. Use that advantage and let whole paragraphs jump upside-down across the screen. When it's time for the next slide, just let them rotate out of view accompanied by applause.

7 Language

While presenting, you usually also speak. Actually it should be the other way round, i.e. using graphics to strengthen your words. Language is a powerful means to turn any presentation into a true adventure.

7.1 Pace

Finding the right pace is highly important. If you have overlooked the time and have only 5 minutes left for the last 10 slides, then you just have to talk faster. Expect your audience to be listening as fast as you are talking – it will be alright.

7.2 Intelligible

When it comes to intelligibility, there are two paths you could go with your way of presenting. On the one hand, you could use a bunch of loanwords and technical terms. That proves even more effective, if you know that your audience is not exactly experienced in the special language you are using.

On the other hand, you might as well speak unintelligibly. Simply clip parts of words and mutter into your beard, and you can rely on the audience not being able to follow you. Muttering is what made Hans Moser famous, once upon a time – maybe you should show a film clip of him as an introduction to your next presentation.

7.3 Volume

A big room, many people, a low voice – and soon enough everyone will be sound asleep. If however the presenter has a very loud organ of speech, the presentation could also be taken the wrong way, that is as a telling-off.

8 Body Language

Being the presenter, you are in the position to show the audience what you think of them – with gestures. From above you can out everyone in their place and set yourself, the knowing one, apart from your listeners.

Always keep in mind that basically every position and movement of your body is capable of transmitting a precise message. If you plant yourself statesmanlike in front of your audience, with one finger pointing to the ceiling and the other hand in your pocket, then you are visually emphasizing how important your speech is. You can build on that too, by tinkering with your keys in your pocket.



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9 Pacing and Prancing

When presenting, you can choose between pacing up and down in front of your audience, and simple prancing. One step toward your listeners, one step back, one to the right, one to the left. It takes only a few steps to enchant your audience and create some uneasiness in the room.

Naturally, you can also refine your presentation by sitting in front of the computer and holding your talk from there, jumping up every now and then to point something out, or simply tapping with your feet.

Pacing and prancing can be wonderfully combined too. Change your volume while pacing about or squint every now and then. It can only be a win for the presentation.

Pacing up and down might be reminiscent of a tiger in its cage, so maybe you could lengthen your routes and also take a walk through the rows of the audience. For such cases, make sure to have a remote control for the computer so you can turn the slides from everywhere in the room. Walking while presenting offers the opportunity of reflecting in your own thoughts and thinking what you want to say next. Pacing and prancing is very common among freethinkers. Readers are static rather, since reading and walking simultaneously could lead to major problems.

10 Direction of View

You are holding a presentation already, so there is really no necessity of looking at your audience. The reader has an obvious advantage here, since nobody would expect him to read and simultaneously glance at his listeners.

All other presenters might want to choose the gaze across “the people” or just the good old tunnel vision – but never looking right at the audience. Other evergreens include checking on your fingernails or phone, since you might have received a text message.

Another treat for everyone involved is the presentation where you concentrate entirely on the computer. Focus on screen and keyboard – if you don’t forget on talking at the same time, everyone will love it.

Last but not least: the big screen. After all, that’s what everyone should look at. Being the presenter, you can therefore simply turn to the screen and show what you want to show. It is most impressive how, when you point at something on the screen, you cast a shadow over it and neither you nor your audience can see what you pointing at.

11 Comparing

A presentation is the perfect opportunity for drawing comparisons. Why not talk about your experiences with the competition. No matter whether you take a company, product or even a service for your comparison, it will make your presentation so much the more grasping.

If however there is not competitor you can rant about, then just go ahead comparing the different departments with each other. Depending on what your goal is, either the people present or the ones who are not present are “good” or “bad”.



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12 Babbling

A little story or funny anecdote – very popular in many presentations. Usually they are only popular with the presenter. I would like to give you some very precious tips here, to help you stay in your audience's head even long after your presentation.

12.1 A Story

You're presenting and all of a sudden a story is creeping up on you. Intending to loosen up your presentation, you just go ahead and tell the story, not considering whether or not it has anything to do with the topic. Following the motto "Change is good", you are enriching your talk.

12.2 A Joke

A joke always loosens the situation, especially if it drags the competition through the dirt or even contains some sexist remark. Of course there is also the possibility of joking about people present, or even better, if you are presenting to several groups, you could tattle directly about the preceding group, a department or just one single co-worker. That always hits and makes for a relaxed atmosphere.

12.3 Politics, Religion and Football

Three topics that never fail turning your presentation into an unforgettable spectacle. If called upon one of these topics, you definitely have to state your opinion and explain in detail why any other opinion could only be wrong. At least you have now managed to cleanse your presentation of any significance.

12.4 Questions

The presentation is over and you can take some questions. It is not important whether you are also going to answer said questions. It is enough to show that you are willing to listen to what people want to know. It would also make you very popular to ask the audience questions. That way you can check whether they have been listening at all.

12.5 Promises

Promise your audience further materials. Give them your e-mail address, refer to websites. However, make sure never to answer any e-mail you might get. Even better, make sure the e-mail address is invalid.

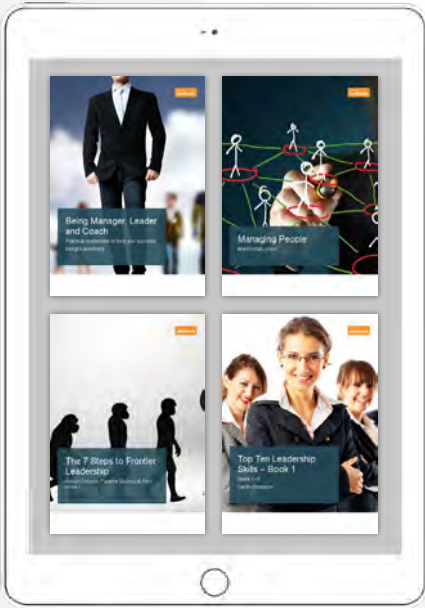
In Conclusion

Every day sees the beginning of many thousand presentations and lectures. Malicious gossip has it that much of those gushes of the mind is in fact negligible, but I didn't mean to concentrate on the meaningfulness of presentations. Content could be material for a thirteenth tip how to ruin your presentation.

In my career I have so far held countless presentations and was exposed to just as many. Once or twice someone meant nice enough to let me in on some tips and tricks.

I always held back when it came to giving advice, though. Encouraging people to change something in their presentations, saying "it could always be made better", might be misperceived.

This book offers an unprecedented opportunity to get advice on how to turn any presentation into a sheer catastrophe. It is likely you feel reminded of one or two colleagues while reading these pages. Reading of other presenters' properties and traits can be amusing. Catching yourself employing one or another of the techniques mentioned herein should be thought-provoking.



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