Perfect practice

By Dave Zielinski

If you’re like many presenters, the end of a presentation signals the start of your brilliant hindsight. If only I hadn't stumbled over that key phrase. If only I had handled that question a bit more deftly or found more compelling data to support my message. And of course, one of the most common post-presentation laments, if only I'd had more time to practice.

The truth is, no amount of preparation time is enough. Allot one month to develop and practice for a big presentation and in the post-mortem, you wish it would have been two. Set aside two weeks, and later you think four would have been better. Or, the three nights you spent burning the midnight oil should have been five.

This inevitable time crunch is partly a function of Parkinson's Law ("work expands to fill the time available for its completion") and partly a result of presenters' perfectionist tendencies. According to presentation-skills coaches, it's also an indictment of the preparation process most presenters go through. Prep time is always scarce, say experts, so how you use that precious time – and in many cases, whether you understand the distinction between practice and rehearsal – is what usually makes the difference between a mediocre presentation and a memorable one.

Use it or lose it

That said, there are no hard-and-fast guidelines for how to use one's presentation-preparation time. Every presenter is different and there are so many variables – the presentation's objective, the presenter's speaking experience, the presenter's innate knowledge of the content or audience, the type of audio-visual support used – that such guidelines are all but useless. It's far better and more realistic, experts say, to be smarter about using whatever prep time you can carve out.

That starts with creating spoken text first, then building graphics or slides to support the resulting script. This may seem obvious, but many presenters work themselves into a hole by creating their slides first, then retrofitting words to support the visuals. While some people can pull off this backward approach, for the majority it leads to disjointed and slide-heavy presentations that tend to wander off message and include extraneous material.

Always be revising

Once you start writing a script, save plenty of time for editing and refining the text. Professional speechwriters suggest writing the first draft as fast as possible – as if a grizzly bear is hot on your heels – without pausing to criticize your work-in-progress or to obsess over phrasing. Save that for later. The true power of concise, compelling and colorful language is arrived at in the revision process, not in the script's creation.

When you edit the text, do it ruthlessly. "Make three points that stick, rather than 10 quick points that leave no lasting impression," says David Dempsey, a trial attorney and a public speaking professor at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. "Constantly ask yourself, 'Is this the most important issue, the best example, the most compelling way to illustrate my point?'"

If your comments or key points aren't carefully honed and revised, says Dempsey, "no amount of practice and no flair for oratory will overcome this fundamental shortcoming."
That said, time-strapped presenters would also do well to heed the adage “Good enough now is better than perfect later,” suggests David Green, curriculum director for Dale Carnegie & Associates in San Diego. While you want your key messages and slides in tip-top shape, you don’t want to let precious hours slip away by obsessing over word choice or phrasing – especially since your actual speech will likely vary from your scripted notes.

“Generally speaking, most people are ready to present long before they think they are, as far as their content and visuals are concerned,” Green says. “They need to allocate more preparation time to rehearsing their delivery and how they’ll connect with the audience.”

Use memory triggers

Whether you use a traditional outline, flowchart or mind map to create and structure your message, you can save time by creating bulleted paragraphs or concept “triggers” that capture a sequence of key points, rather than writing out an entire speech word for word.

According to Steve Mandel, CEO of Mandel Communications Inc. in Capitola, Calif., the trigger approach encourages the extemporaneous speaking style most audiences prefer. “I tell presenters to strive for dialogue behavior in a monologue setting,” he says. “Dialogue behavior is two people talking across a kitchen table – it’s comfortable and natural, and you don’t have to think much about it. Monologue behavior is a presenter talking stiffly to his slides.”

Mandel says presenters should spend more time at the outset of presentation development honing their core messages. Nailing this “elevator speech” – the core that cuts through all levels of a presentation – can take time, but it’s important to invest that time to avoid throwing your hands up in frustration and leapfrogging to more painless parts of the process (such as slide creation) before you have it.

Marilynn Mobley, president of The Acorn Consulting Group in Marietta, Ga., suggests rehearsing while your script is still in a formative stage to get an early sense of where you may be spending too much time and what content can be trimmed. In a one-hour presentation she created on conducting public relations on a shoestring, Mobley allocated her preparation time this way: Since she knew her topic and audience well, 15 percent of her time went to researching audience needs. About 50 percent of her time was spent crafting the presentation – deciding on key messages, supporting proof points, developing transitions and creating electronic slides. Another 20 percent was dedicated to initial rehearsal, "going through it as though the audience were right there – practicing pauses, interaction with slides and working with the technology to determine if the flow worked and the timing was realistic," Mobley says. Ten percent of her time was spent refining the presentation based on that first rehearsal, including editing and switching the order of some slides. The last 5 percent was devoted to a final rehearsal.

Is it practice ... or rehearsal?

Think for a moment about your own preparation routine. Let's say you've got your text, slides and handouts in good shape and have begun practicing delivery. If you're like most busy presenters, you practice on your commute, by stealing time in your office, on the couch at home or maybe while watching your son or daughter's soccer practice.

And therein lies a big problem, experts say: Too much time in practice and not enough in rehearsal.

Rehearsal means being up on your feet, using the same gestures, eye contact, pacing and interaction with the AV equipment you will use in your actual presentation.
Practice – sitting on an airplane or in your office reviewing the script or slides – isn't rehearsal, says Dale Carnegie's Green. Just as actors in a play wouldn't dream of going live without dress rehearsal, non-professional presenters should never step before an audience without at least one or two full rehearsals, preferably with a few carefully chosen humans present to provide feedback.

"You can't just sit back in the green room and talk about what you're going to say in your presentation," says Green. "You have to stand up and rehearse, real time. That's what rehearsal is for – to get your mind off the content and onto connecting with an audience, and that's what makes it different from practice. I still don't think the business world understands the value of rehearsal.

"Too often we overwork what we are going to say during practice, and under-work how we are going to say it during rehearsal." Green adds, "If it were only about the material, we could simply e-mail our presentations to audiences and have them e-mail any questions back."

**Mental vs. mechanical preparation**

Jim Cathcart, a professional speaker for 26 years, makes a clear distinction between mechanical and psychological preparation time. Mechanical preparation covers getting all your stuff in order – script, audio-visuals, technology, sound, room setup and the like.

Psychological prep, on the other hand, refers to spending time getting inside the audience members' heads, visualizing your performance, anticipating potential problems and getting yourself mentally prepared to speak.

Psychological prep also addresses these questions: Who are these people in my audience, and how are they different from me? How will they perceive my entrance into their world? As intruder, reporter or respected adviser? What keeps them up at night? And what gets them excited? What do I want echoing in their heads when they walk out of this presentation?

Cathcart argues that the presenter who spends more time on this mental side will almost always have a greater impact than the one who strives for technical perfection. "If I can articulate something an audience feels strongly about, then I can afford to ramble a bit, be dressed a bit awkwardly, have a few distracting gestures, and not know exactly where everything is in my handouts," he says. "It's important to remember that most audiences make their decisions emotionally, then justify them logically."

**Rethinking visual prep**

Another place many presenters use their preparation time unwisely is in the process of creating their PowerPoint slides, either by spending too much time on too many slides, or not enough time to prepare even modestly competent slides.

No one wants to be creating or editing PowerPoint slides in the panicky last hours before a presentation, so it's important to set aside enough time for the task – but not too much time. For those new to the software, experts suggest allotting at least one hour of development time per electronic slide, which includes time for initial design and text revision. Pros, of course, can crank out finished versions much faster. (In helping clients gauge development costs, for example, New York City-based MediaNet Inc. tells clients it can create about three to five slides per hour.)
Managing your media

Equally important is how you rehearse with your media. For many, rehearsal means reviewing bulleted text points and using their slides, in effect, as cue cards. The problem comes in spending too much time on this "visible" content – that which an audience can see and read for itself – at the expense of rehearsing "invisible" content, such as slide transitions, personal stories, elaboration and analogies.

Since an audience’s focus will either be on the visual or on the presenter, not both simultaneously, Steve Mandel has his clients rehearse in a way that supports that principle. A salesperson might say, for example, "I've just talked about the problems we've uncovered with your distribution process, and I want to show you one possible solution based on conversations with your IT group." The salesperson then shows the slide and stops talking for five seconds – because the audience is reading the slide and not listening to her, Mandel says. To recapture attention, the presenter moves a step or two toward the audience and begins talking again.

What you choose to put on slides is also important – and potentially can save or waste time, depending on your approach. In developing slides, Dale Carnegie's Green suggests presenters ask themselves, "How many bulleted text slides could I replace with something more visually stimulating that will get my audience thinking about the same point?" Tapping in-house design support for creative ideas can help in this area, but making an effort to think about content in a visual way is really the key.

Jim Cathcart says he sees more presenters than ever using visual concepts to break up a numbing parade of text- or data-based slides. One speaker put up a slide of the street sign Wrong Way, Do Not Enter to talk about a mistake people make implementing a business process. "He could have easily used bulleted text to describe the problem, but instead he used the visual and explained the problem in his own words," Cathcart says.

Besides making the presentation more compelling, he says, such a visually oriented approach can save presenters time (fewer slides to create), and force them to focus on the skills that most often raise a presentation from mediocre to memorable: spontaneity, audience interaction, listening, and mastering the material, not just memorizing it.

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