Fine-Tuning Your Presentation Skills

While we all like to think that what we say is the most important part of the presentation, communication also includes how we say it and what the listener hears. In fact, in many ways, what the listener hears is more in how you say it and your body language. Imagine writing a beautiful speech about world peace, for example, and then shouting it. Most people would not believe that you really wanted peace due to your angry delivery.

In this chapter, we look at how our vocal and physical habits affect what we say. In addition, you are given tips on how to achieve a smoother delivery of your material. And, finally, you learn the POWER presentation method.

Words That Matter

When you deliver information, how you say something is just as important as what you say. Even if your message is important and interesting, when it includes distractions, it can lose its effectiveness. A huge part of your job is communicating effectively to your learners. Communication is both verbal and non-verbal and within communication, there are three elements:

1. **Verbal.** Your word choice, your message to the listener = 7 percent
2. **Vocal.** Inflection, variety, and projection of your voice = 38 percent
3. **Visual.** What the listener sees, your body language = 55 percent

These three elements are often referred to as the 3Vs. As you can see, while what you say is important, the biggest effect you will have on an audience will come from the way you say it and your visual presentation. In this chapter, we explore each element in detail.

Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Identify two ways to eliminate verbal fat from an intended message;
2. Recognize the effect that vocal pitch and pace have on an intended message;
3. Recognize non-verbal behaviors that detract from an intended message; and
4. Recall each step of the POWER presentation method.
Talking Terrors

Some trainers minimize the importance of the verbal, vocal, and visual messages they send to their learners. These trainers tend to engage in “talking terrors.”

Talking terrors include:
- Using meaningless or superfluous words (verbal fat);
- Lacking voice inflection, variety, or projection, or using upspeak (allowing the voice to rise as though asking a question); and
- Making distracting gestures, expressions, or movements.

As you can see, the talking terrors relate directly to the 3Vs. Instead of reinforcing the message a trainer wants to send, these talking terrors can prevent the learner from receiving it.

Verbal Fat

Seven percent of your communication comes from the verbal impact you make on learners. This is a small proportion, but it’s still an area with which to be concerned. We refer to the superfluous words that block the flow of your presentation as verbal fat. One type of verbal fat is filler words—words that a trainer uses to fill awkward silences. Some examples of filler words include the following:
- Like;
- Uh;
- Umm;
- Kind of;
- You know;
- Sorta;
- What have you; and
- Or something.

Note that some of these are obviously fillers, while others are complete words or phrases; when used unnecessarily, all can be considered verbal fat. Have you ever used words or phrases such as these? If you’ve included verbal fat during training sessions in the past, it’s time to go on a verbal diet!

Verbal fat can make even educated people look uneducated. For example: A potential candidate was under consideration for a New York senate seat when she gave an interview and used verbal fillers such as “you know” and “um” to the point of distraction. She was ridiculed in the press for her use of verbal fat, and her critics argued that her speaking patterns made her appear unsophisticated and uneducated.
Silence is Golden

As you present a training session, it’s important to remember that silence can be golden. Silence creates the aura of knowledge and credibility. Most importantly, though, by remaining silent, you preserve the credibility you’ve already established. Silence can also help you avoid verbal fat in your speech. Here’s how to implement silence:

1. Pause. When you feel the temptation to “fatten up,” pause instead.
2. Give yourself a moment to search for the right word, then resume speaking. This pause increases your impact, strengthens your credibility, and keeps your language lean.

Repeat this process as necessary. Professional public speakers are taught to eliminate filler words such as “ah” and “um” from their vocabulary. Doing so helps them sound credible, intelligent, and effective. The same skills that work for them will also work for you:

- **Step 1—Be aware.** The first step in eliminating fillers is awareness. Tape or video record yourself during a training session. Review the recording and identify which fillers you use most often.
- **Step 2—Pause.** Recognize the importance of the pause. It allows you to collect your thoughts, breathe, and relax. Pausing is one of the most powerful skills you can add to your trainer toolbox. Pausing also helps you not talk so fast that your trainees have difficulty understanding you. Many people tend to talk fast when they’re nervous.

3 Based on research by Albert Mehrabian, Ph.D., UCLA, Silent Messages

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**Activity 5.1**

The Skinny on Verbal Fat

1. Label the pie chart with the corresponding element of communication.
2. What is verbal fat?
3. Give four examples of verbal fat.
4. List two ways you can cut verbal fat out of your presentation.
5. Why is pausing important?

Answers appear in appendix A.
A Voice That Carries

In addition to your verbal message, you must consider the message your tone conveys to participants. The sound of your voice is even more important than the words you speak. Do you speak clearly and are you easy to understand? Consider the vocal impression you’re leaving if people frequently misunderstand you or ask you to repeat what you said. This is why the second talking terror is the sound of your voice.

Practice your training session before going in front of a live audience. Record the session if possible. Does your voice become high-pitched or monotone when speaking? Listen objectively and rehearse to gain the respect and attention of the audience.

Another common error that people make is speaking too quickly. When some people are nervous, they tend to speak rapidly, which in turn causes them to make other speech blunders such as verbal fat or poor body language like fidgeting. Speaking quickly also makes it more difficult for others to understand and remember your intended message.

When considering your vocal message, pay attention to pitch and pace.

Pitch

Being mindful of your vocal tone and rate ensures that your message—the skills, knowledge, or attitude—isn’t lost in delivery.

When people are stressed or threatened, their voices can carry a singsong tone, making them sound whiny or childish. A high-pitched voice can be hard to take seriously. When a person lacks inflection in his or her voice, learners tend to tune out. Use your pitch and your pace to make a positive impact. One of the best ways to check your pitch is to record a dry run or actual training session. While it might be an uncomfortable exercise at first, it’s the most accurate gauge of your true pitch.

Another problem trainers have is using upspeak. Upspeak is when a person makes a question out of a sentence that isn’t a question (or speaks “up” at the end of a sentence). If you’re guilty of using upspeak when communicating with others, consider the following tips:

1. Practice with your voicemail message. Many people use upspeak when recording their voicemail greetings. Record yours without it.
2. Consciously drop your voice at the end of a sentence.
3. Practice with a commonly used phrase, such as “Hi, my name is ________ and I am a ___________ at the credit union.”

Pace

It’s better to speak a little too slowly than too fast. However, speaking slowly can have its disadvantages. You might bore your learners. The best advice for any trainer is to keep a steady pace.

Although you don’t want to speak slowly, speaking too quickly has no advantages. When a person speaks too quickly, it often indicates nervousness.
Your goal as a trainer is to come across as poised and prepared. Slow down so learners can understand and remember the message you’re trying to get across.

**Talking Tips**

As a trainer, you’re a leader at the credit union. Your learners look to you for knowledge, so it’s important that your vocal quality convey the polished, professional, and knowledgeable image that participants respect. Consider adopting the following vocal skills:

- Speak to the last row in your audience, but raise your volume naturally. If you find you must strain to be heard, you need to use a microphone.
- Articulate clearly, making sure you pronounce all important syllables, particularly the last.
- Pace yourself. Pause between main ideas, and be careful not to run ideas together.
- Vary your rhythm and pitch appropriately to avoid sounding monotone. Your voice should generate energy and reflect the enthusiasm you feel for the topic.
- Know the words you tend to stumble over, and either avoid them or practice them until you can say them perfectly 10 times.

**Meaningful Moments**

Remember the pie chart at the beginning of the chapter? It showed that 55 percent of communication is visual. A large part of the visual in a presentation is your body language. This is why the final talking terror is making unnecessary and distracting physical movements. Fidgeting makes you appear nervous and vulnerable and makes the audience feel they’re wasting their time with someone who seems ill at ease about the subject matter. Do your best to convey a calm and controlled demeanor. Your audience will see you as a professional who knows her or his topic.

Think about job fairs, where you’ve seen rows of booths filled with professionals advertising new and exciting...
careers. When trainers fidget too much during a training session or presentation, listeners begin to see the characters at a job fair take the stage. The distracting movements and gestures that can be seen at a job fair can be seen in the classroom, as well. Let’s look at characterizations of several types of movements:

- **Bankers** frequently rattle coins in their pockets.
- **Opticians** constantly adjust their glasses. They’re on. They’re off. They’re in desperate need of contact lenses.
- **Tailors** readjust their clothing. The tie is a particular object of affection for males in this category.
- **Jewelers** fiddle with their trinkets. Necklaces are a big attraction for females in this category. Ring twisters can be found among both genders.
- **Surgeons** rub their hands together like they’re washing them although there’s no soap, water, or sink.
- **Toymakers** play with their pens, markers, or other props—whatever happens to be around. Their motions distract the listeners and derail the message.

To avoid becoming one of the characters we discussed in our job fair analogy, consider the message your body and movements are conveying.

- **Be aware.** What gestures do you use when talking to others? Ask coworkers to identify your distracting physical movements or behaviors. Their answers might surprise you because you may be unaware of your actions. The best trainers videotape one of their training sessions and watch themselves in action. It’s the most accurate route to awareness.
- **Maintain a relaxed position.** Keep your hands steady and relaxed in front of you (if seated), or put one hand in your pocket and keep the other one at your side (if standing). If you feel the need to fidget, ask yourself, “Does this gesture help me make my point?” If the answer is “no,” return to a relaxed position.

Does this mean you should avoid gestures or movement during your training? Absolutely not. Instead, strive for meaningful gestures. Keep your message and your movements consistent. Use your body in a way that reiterates your intended message.

When presenting the training session, keep these tips in mind:

- **Begin with eye contact.** Eye contact is another way to create trust with your learners. Focus on individual listeners and create a bond by looking them directly in the eyes for a few moments. Making eye contact helps you determine if your message is being received or if further clarification is needed.
- **Be prepared.** Knowing your content and how you’ll present it is a prerequisite for projecting and establishing a bond with the audience.
- **Smile!** Smiling adds expression to your face and puts learners at ease.
- **Express emotion with your facial muscles.** The most engaging trainers are animated!
When planning your training, it’s important to predetermine your topic, message, and purpose. You should also know exactly why you are motivated to speak before the group. This is why, when you plan a training session or presentation, you must first ask yourself the following four questions:

1. **What is my topic?** Know, in general, what you will cover.
2. **What is my message?** Know the one key point you want the listeners to remember.
3. **What is my purpose?** Know how you want the audience to think or feel, or what you want them to experience.
4. **What’s in it for me?** Understand why you’re motivated. Is it the thrill of speaking before a group?

We’ve discussed how to use your voice and body to properly convey your message, but let’s discuss the content of your message. No one wants to listen to boring, dry lectures. You must capture the learners’ interest and keep it. One way to enhance your training is the **POWER presentation method**:

- **Punch**
- **One Theme**
- **Window**
- **Ear**
- **Retention**

**Punch**

Your message must be powerful. It’s important to engage learners early, reel them in, and keep them hooked. How can you make this happen? The best place to start is with your introduction.

- Begin with the ending.
- Try a personal story.
- Use an anecdote or illustration.
- Make use of a rhetorical question.
- Throw in a quotation.
- Project into the future.
- Look into the past.
- Use humor.

As you learned earlier, the verbal, vocal, and visual image you portray to learners affects the message they receive. Be confident! This means avoiding certain statements.
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One Message
Focus the training on one main theme that’s addressed in many ways. This helps learners remember the most important point. For example, if the training session covers what to do during a robbery, then discussing sexual harassment laws is irrelevant.

Window
This refers to using specific examples and illustrations to provide proof, enabling the learners to “see” your point. People tend to remember humorous or outrageous examples, so use some if you can. Try using many examples to demonstrate your point.

Ear
Speak in easy-to-understand speech, avoiding clichés and technical jargon. If you have to use terms that your learners may not be familiar with, then explain them up front. In addition, you can hand them a sheet of definitions before you begin the class.

Retention
Use specifics so learners will maintain knowledge.
- Summarize key points.
- Loop back to the beginning.
- Ask the audience to do something specific.
- Appeal to the positive.
- Project ahead.
- Tell a symbolic story that embraces your message.

Implementing the POWER method ensures you focus on one message, get the point across by using specific examples and visual aids, use easily understood language (being sure to avoid tech talk or jargon), and instill methods of recapping the topic so learners retain the information you’ve delivered.

Summary
It’s true that how you say something is often more important than what you say. In this chapter, you learned how to improve your delivery through a variety of techniques such as maintaining a level pitch where appropriate, maintaining a steady pace in your speech, and trimming the verbal fat from your words.

In addition, you examined body language and common habits that people have. As fidgeting distracts from the message, it’s essential to work toward delivering a presentation with appropriate body language.

Finally, you reviewed the POWER presentation model and how it can help you become a better trainer. All these skills will enrich the lives of the trainees who depend on you to help them learn new skills or improve the skills that they have.

Now that you know the importance of how you present training materials in terms of your vocal technique and body language, you have additional considerations when preparing for a presentation. Consider having someone video record your presentation so you can critique it and make adjustments. Every improvement you make helps the learners.
For each item, choose the correct answer from among the four options provided.

1. When planning a presentation, it’s important to ask yourself four questions early on. Which of the following is not one of those questions?
   a. What is my topic?
   b. What is the maximum time allotted for my presentation?
   c. What is in it for me?
   d. What is my purpose?

2. When discussing the POWER presentation method, it’s important to remember that POWER stands for
   a. prepare, open, window, enhance, and review.
   b. punch, open, window, enhance, and retain.
   c. prepare, one theme, window, ear, and retention.
   d. punch, one theme, window, ear, and retention.

3. Within the POWER model, the term “window” refers to the practice of
   a. using specific examples and illustrations to help learners understand your point.
   b. using simple, jargon-free language to help learners better understand what is being discussed.
   c. opening your presentation with a quotation or description to help learners better understand the viewpoint of people who are already trained and working in the field.
   d. discussing conflicting viewpoints to help learners get a more complete perspective of the topic at hand.

4. All of the following techniques can help capture learners’ attention at the beginning of a presentation except
   a. including a personal story or recollection.
   b. making use of a rhetorical question.
   c. either projecting into the future or looking into the past.
   d. using jargon to get listeners excited about the vocabulary associated with the field.

5. Which of the following actions is least effective for helping learners remember the information was covered?
   a. asking the audience to take some specific action
   b. telling a symbolic story that reflects the message of the presentation
   c. emphasizing the negative consequences of forgetting the information from the presentation
   d. looping back to the beginning of the presentation

Answers appear in appendix A.