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Compelling Conclusions

Ten Do's and Don'ts About Finishing A Presentation

It is an **interesting fact** of presentation lifeⁱ that your audience will generally recall how you ended a presentation as much as how you started it – assuming that they are still awake. It amazes me that many Sales Engineers focus on starting off their presentations or demonstrations with the proverbial bang; an energizer, funny story, challenging fact etc. Yet they neglect the crucial final thirty seconds and potentially undo all the great work of the preceding thirty minutes.

So let's examine some ways NOT to end your presentation, and also, by contrast, a few methods to leave the audience pumped up and to have your key message truly resonate:

1. **DO NOT end with "Any Questions?"** Although you may systematically answer every question, eventually they will trickle down to inconsequential issues or complete silence. Any enthusiasm and energy build up by your audience will plummet and they will run out the door or leave the virtual session. Even worse, you may end with that "zinger" question which has no answer or is a competitive trap.
2. **DO be prepared for questions.** Position yourself by saying something like *"I'll take a few questions now, and then I'll wrap up with a personal story / customer reference / important piece of information for you"*. Now you will have control of the end of your presentation and can complete it on a high note.
3. **DO NOT finish with a joke.** Unless you are selling a movie script or comic books. Remember you are actually selling a solution to someone's business problems – which is a serious matter. It is OK to use humor (with or without a "u") within your presentation, if appropriate and relevant, just don't finish with it.

4. **DO remember to be brief.** In fact, why not write your next presentation or demonstration from the end, and go backwards? Try to keep your conclusion to three sentences. Having a summary slide with a mass of PowerPoint bullets on it is a bad idea (note to Marketing Department..)
5. **DO NOT finish with an apology.** Be proud of yourself, be proud of your team, and be proud of your product. Finishing your session with statements such as “I’m sorry if I ran on too long” , “I apologize if this may not have been of interest to everyone” , or “I realize this topic can be a little boring” are guaranteed ways to drain all enthusiasm from the audience.
6. **Do wrap-up by repeating a title or theme.** This is a classic piece of Toastmasters advice. Use the title or theme of your presentation as the ending, to draw everything together full circle. For example, if you are selling solar technology and you are presenting about energy efficiency, conclude with “*And that is how you can use Solar Panels to cut energy costs by 30%*”. You’re done!
7. **DO NOT end with false thanks.** William Safire’s anthology, “[Lend me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History](#)”ⁱⁱⁱ, notes that of the 217 speeches he collected, only 7 end with “thank you”. You are not collecting an Oscar or Academy Award, so starting and ending with thanks, except under very formal circumstances, should be avoided. As an unbiased reporter, I should note that not everyone agrees with that piece of advice, but take it for what it’s worth.
8. **Do use repetition or imagery.** Another Toastmaster standby. Use a word or phrase and repeat it in cadence – “*Life is an adventure, dare it. A duty, perform it. An opportunity, take it. A journey, complete it ...and a goal, so achieve it!*” Imagery can be in the form of a picture, quote or more physical such as slamming a book shut, pulling out a power cord, or (for financial services or housing) popping a balloon.
9. **Do NOT picture the audience naked.** Or use any of those other ridiculous “tips” and “advice”. Apart from being very distracting in having to visualize people in various states of undress – try visualizing your final thirty seconds of delivery instead.

10. **Do practice, and practice again.** Remember that the final thirty seconds is crucial to make an impact. Just as everyone always remembers the winning touchdown, goal or putt in sports, so they will remember your final few sentences if you get it right and leave the room or webcast with a positive attitude.
11. **BONUS – DO use visual reinforcement.** Instead of having a ‘Thank You’ or ‘Any Questions’ slide on the screen , finish with a slide that shows the benefits, outcomes and differences of your solution. This is doubly important for remote sessions.

Summary

You begin your presentation with an energetic question which gets the audience thinking, your surge through your demo hitting all the relevant business issues and then you splutter into your finale. You finish speaking yet the audience hasn’t stopped listening, so you utter those fateful words “*any questions?*” Don’t do it! Start on a high, finish on a high, previewing the ending if a little unusual and then wrap-up with a grand finale. So now you have learnt how to energize your endings with a compelling conclusion. (See point #6)

So, anyone have any questions about these tips? (Points #1 and 3)

“From now on, ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put.”

Winston Churchill (1874-1965), Prime Minister of Great Britain.

(With grateful thanks to the University of Michigan Toastmasters organization)

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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ⁱ The Serial Effect – Recency http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial_position_effect#Recency_effect

ⁱⁱ William Safire , Norton & Co. October 2004. ISBN 0393059316