

Solid Starts To Presentations

"The beginning is the most important part of the work"

Plato

When we speak, we have about one minute to capture our audience's attention, establish credibility, orient them to our topic and motivate them to listen; says Darlene Price, president of Well Said Inc., and author of *"Well Said! Presentations and Conversations That Get Results"*.

If you waste those precious opening seconds with a joke, an agenda, an apology, housekeeping details, a string of thank-you's, or a rambling, pointless paragraph littered with "um"s and "uh"s, your audience members' minds are likely to drift, and you may not get them back.

That's a tall order for any speaker — and it requires us to develop and rehearse a well-crafted, attention-getting opener. So, we offer seven options:

1. TELL A CAPTIVATING STORY

"Of all the starters in your toolkit, storytelling is among the most powerful and consistently successful," Price says.

As humans, we're hardwired to enjoy and learn from stories. From bedtime stories and campfires, to Broadway theatres and boardrooms — heroes, villains, conflict, plots, dialogue, and lessons learned draw us in, remind us of our own lives, and hold our attention.

The story can be about you personally, which tells the audience first hand why you're invested in and passionate about the topic. Or you can tell a story about another person whom the audience can learn from.

Or, tell a fable, wisdom tale, historic event, or anecdote. The idea is: start with a brief 60 to 90 second narrative that launches your speech and captivates your listeners, and make sure the story encapsulates the key point of your message.

To help you, consider the following questions:

- What challenges have you (or another) faced in relation to your topic?
- How did you (or another) overcome them?
- Who or what helped you or hindered you?
- What lessons were learned?
- What do you want your audience to gain, feel, or do as a result of the story?

2. ASK A RHETORICAL, THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTION

As Shakespeare wrote in 'The Merchant of Venice,' "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

As a speaker, you ask rhetorical questions for persuasive effect; you don't expect the audience to answer aloud, rather silently to themselves. When crafted and delivered well, rhetorical questions influence an audience to believe in the position of the speaker. Clearly, Shakespeare's character Shylock is leading his listeners to think 'yes' four times in order to justify revenge against Antonio. What do you want your audience to say 'yes' or 'no' to?

In addition to yes-or-no questions, this technique can also arouse curiosity and motivate your audience to think about the answer.

3. STATE A SHOCKING STATISTIC OR HEADLINE

The Vice President of Sales for America's leading healthcare IT company successfully sells software solutions to hospitals by starting her presentations with the following: "According to a new study in the Journal of Patient Safety, medical errors leading to patient death are much higher than previously thought. Preventable adverse events cause up to 400,000 deaths per year for patients who seek care at a hospital. That means medical errors are the third leading cause of death behind heart disease and cancer. Our vision is to create a world free of medical errors, and we need your help."

The statistic, bold claim, or headline needs to be directly related to the main purpose of your presentation. Its impact ideally persuades the audience to listen and respond positively to your recommendation and next steps.

4. USE A POWERFUL QUOTE

Employ the wise words of a well-known person because their reputation allows you to tap into their credibility, likeability, and notoriety. The quote must have meaning and relevance to the audience.

Imagine you're urging a group to reach consensus, or giving a talk on conflict management. You could open with: "Mark Twain once said, 'If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary.' Even though some of us disagree on the XYZ issue, each of us is necessary in reaching a resolution."

5. SHOW A GRIPPING PHOTO OR IMAGE

A picture is worth a thousand words — so use photos or images instead of text when possible.

A quality photo adds aesthetic appeal, increases comprehension, engages the audience's imagination, and makes the message more memorable.

The President of an electronics equipment company needed his managers to cut costs. Rather than showing mundane charts, graphs, and spreadsheets, he opened the meeting by asking: "What sank the Titanic?" When everyone in unison replied,

"an iceberg," he displayed a beautiful high-definition image of an iceberg on the screen: The tip of the iceberg was clearly visible above the water; the much larger portion was dimly visible below the surface of the water.

"The same thing is about to happen to our company," he continued. "Hidden costs — the dangers beneath the surface — are about to sink this company. I need your help."

This visual metaphor spawned a creative, productive brainstorming session that inspired every business unit manager to diligently hunt for what they labelled the "icebergs". The result was saving millions and ultimately the company.

6. USE A PROP OR CREATIVE VISUAL AID

A prop is a magnetic tool that hooks your audience and keeps them watching — or listening. A visual aid can also help emphasize a point.

A Vice President of Sales at a large insurance company is an avid tennis player. He wanted to kick off his annual meeting with a bang — so he used his tennis racquet to emphasize 'acing the competition,' 'rallying together as a team,' and winning a 'grand slam' through great customer service.

Think about how you could use items like a watch, a ball, a deck of cards, a rolled up newspaper, or another prop to introduce your topic, captivate the audience, inject humour, and drive home your message. Also think about how you can reintroduce your prop – in a relevant way – throughout your presentation.

7. PLAY A SHORT VIDEO

Imagine kicking off an account team meeting with a video of compelling customer testimonials, or opening a fundraising event for endangered species by showing an Amur leopard playing with her cubs in the wild.

Videos evoke emotional responses. Unlike text and bullet points on a slide, you can employ people, pictures, and sound to reel in the audience, add drama, and communicate the gist of your message quickly.

As Walt Disney said: "I would rather entertain and hope that people learned something than educate people and hope they were entertained."

The key take-away's for you from this lesson should be:

1. The opening 60 to 90 seconds of your presentation set it up for success.
2. It should provoke some kind of reaction in your audience.
3. Don't forego entertainment for education. Many professionals see entertainment as "flippant", but it is key to grabbing your audience's attention.