

The Straight Talker's Manifesto

No. 01: Six Secrets of Professional Presenting



by Steven Pearce

Most presentations are dire. Even the word makes people shudder. Odd word anyway, don't you think? Nineteenth century diplomats may have had to "present" their credentials at court; such formality is unlikely to resonate for the ipod generation.

Instead of setting out to present, why don't you excite, stimulate or inspire instead?

This manifesto is a distillation of the ten years I've spent working with professional people all over the world as a communication coach. I see the same mistakes over and over again – professional people, often with great ideas to convey, blowing it because they don't understand how to make their message compelling.

It's not down to theatrics or voice projection. Anyone who can hold a conversation can give a great presentation. It's about clarity and conviction.

I firmly believe that great communicators are made as well as born. I hope these six ideas help unleash the great communicator in you.



8 Little Words

Seth Godin, doyen of the blogosphere, has a great quote

“If you can’t state your position in 8 words or less, you don’t have a position.”

Similarly, if you can’t state your presentation’s core message in 8 words or less, you don’t have a presentation. Unfortunately, not any old 8 words will do.

I could say the core message of this manifesto is: *I know a lot about giving great presentations.*

8 words, sure, but hardly compelling for you. I’m establishing myself as an expert, but do you really give a **** about my expertise?

This is where experts – be they lawyers, IT professionals or finance directors – come unstuck. They think they establish credibility as communicators by demonstrating their knowledge or expertise.



Wrong. True credibility springs from the ability to relate your expertise to the (as yet) unmet needs of your audience.

What kind of needs? Well, the ones that are common to all of us. They've not changed a lot since [Abe Maslow](#) popped them into his hierarchical pyramid fifty years ago: the need to be free from fear and the need to make progress towards key goals. So “here's how to stay out of jail” is a compelling message. So is “here's how to look good in front of your boss”. Or “how to spend more time with the kids.” Anything that offers a specific, tangible benefit to your audience.

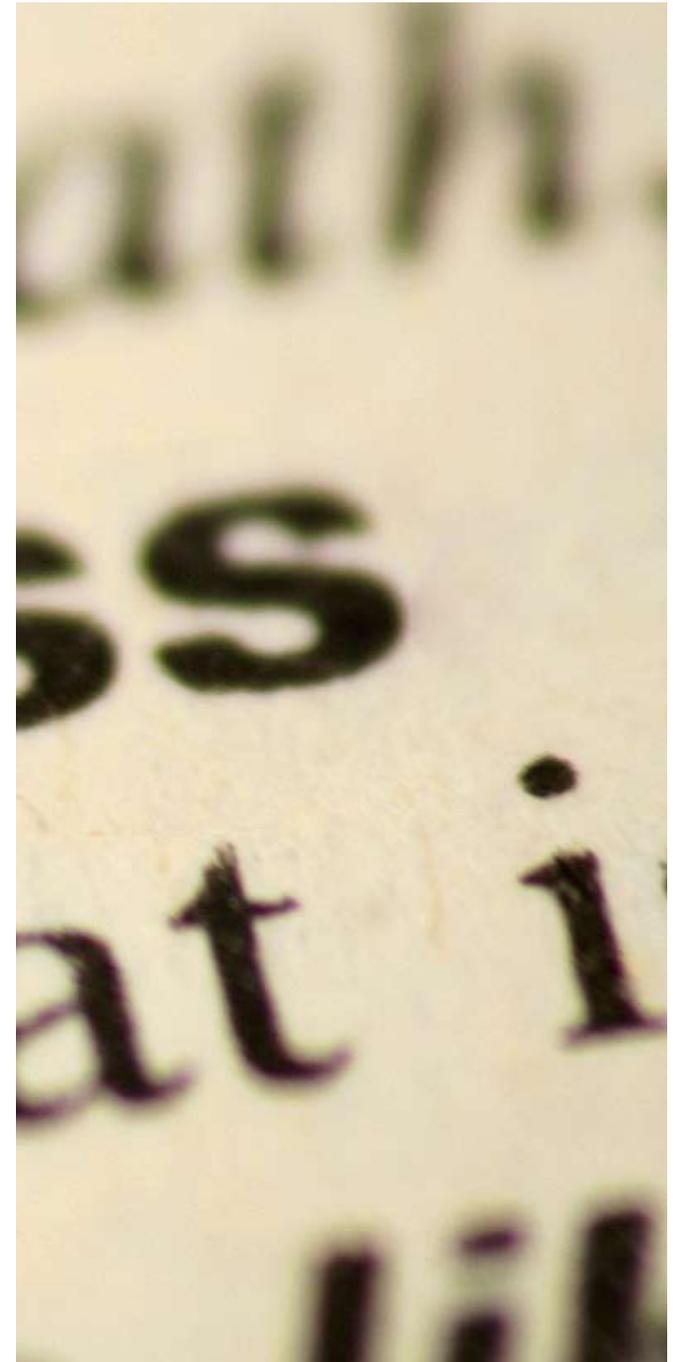
So the core message of this manifesto could become: *here's how you can become a fantastic communicator.*

A far better core message, I hope you'll agree, because it's all about meeting your needs (to overcome the fear of looking foolish, to look good in front of colleagues and clients, to get a sense of accomplishment etc.) not about me.



Without a core message (which can very usefully serve as your opening line) your presentation is built on quick-sand.

Formulate a brief, compelling core message.



The Handful of Earth Principle

Go out into the garden, grab a handful of earth, and throw it at the nearest window. See how much sticks.

If you throw together a presentation without structure, the same result will apply: not much sticks.

Structure doesn't have to be fancy. We're not talking Wagnerian opera here. But the brain is hard-wired to get the posh teacups out for simply-structured argument and bolt the door against random reams of disconnected bulls***.

Guess which category 90% of business presentations fall into?

What is a simple structure? Look to the worlds of fiction, storytelling and myth for a clue.



The ones which have stood the test of time have the following themes:

Good vs. Evil

Rags vs. Riches

Lost vs. Found

Simple thematic contrasts. So OK, maybe your proposal on how to get the mailroom working better doesn't fall into the Good vs. Evil category. (Though wait a minute...)

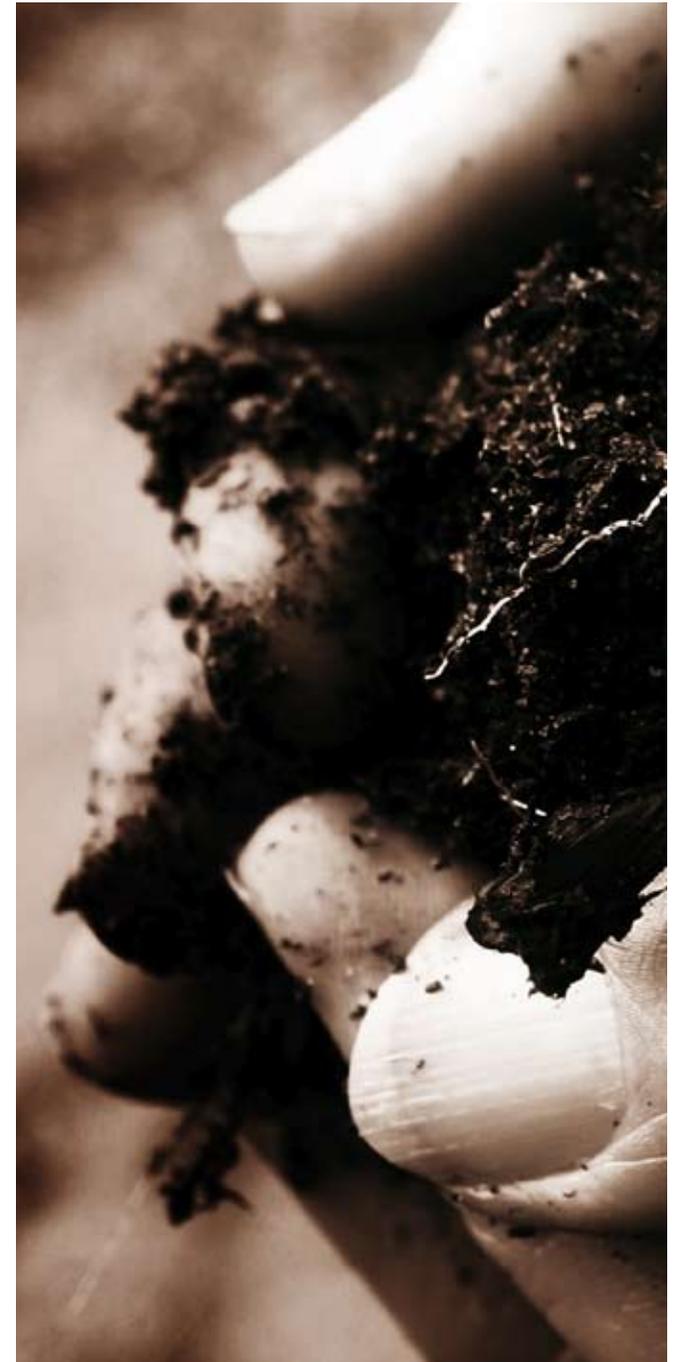
But building your presentation around a simple contrast is one of the most effective structures available to you. How about these:

Problem/Solution

Threats/Opportunities

Myth/Reality

Structure your material.



Connect (emotionally)

Last time I looked, the boffins were arguing about whether the old left brain/ right brain duopoly is quite as neat as first proposed. Regardless of the science, the concept makes a lot of sense. We are not purely rational creatures (if we were, why did I pay well over the odds for that mint condition vinyl copy of *Sgt Pepper* at the record fair yesterday?) Nor are we purely emotional creatures either (if we were, how come I held back from snapping up *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* too?)

The best presentations appeal to both the emotional and the rational. Sure your facts are important. But it is the stories or - if you are squeamish – the **case studies** that relate your facts to the audience's world and make the most impact. They give your ideas a human scale. They tap into the right side of the brain. (Or is it the left?)

Consider Seb Coe, when he was leading the London bid for the 2012 Olympics. At the final presentation, of course there was all the factual stuff about investment and infrastructure.



But Coe also said this:

“When I was 12 years old I was marched into a large school hall with my classmates and we watched grainy pictures from the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games. Two athletes from our home town were competing. John Sherwood won a bronze medal in the 400m hurdles. His wife Sheila just narrowly missed gold in the long jump.

By the time I was back in my classroom, I knew what I wanted to do - and what I wanted to be. Thirty-five years on, I stand before you with those memories still fresh. Still inspired by this great movement.”

The story elevated the speech way above the technical and financial, and into the realms of values, beliefs, dreams and aspirations. It made an emotional connection which, some said, swung the vote in London’s favour.

Tell stories.



Authenticity Rocks

First there was sleaze. Then there was spin. Finally there was Iraq.

Whatever your politics, you cannot have failed to notice the consequence of all these things: a complete disintegration of trust in the spoken utterances of politicians. Less obviously, this has morphed slowly but surely into kneejerk distrust of any public pronouncement by anyone who purports to speak with authority.

Your audience can sniff out a fake from 20 metres. There is zero tolerance for corporate ventriloquism these days. So if you have the temerity to speak words which you don't fully own - ones formulated for you by your PR agency or HR team - then pack a parachute. You are certain to be shot down.

You must write your own presentations, regardless of whether you are the world's greatest wordsmith. Richard Branson certainly isn't - in fact I don't think his presentation skills have improved one jot in all his years in business. But this is critical to his appeal - he's not slick, but then the age is signally sick of slick.

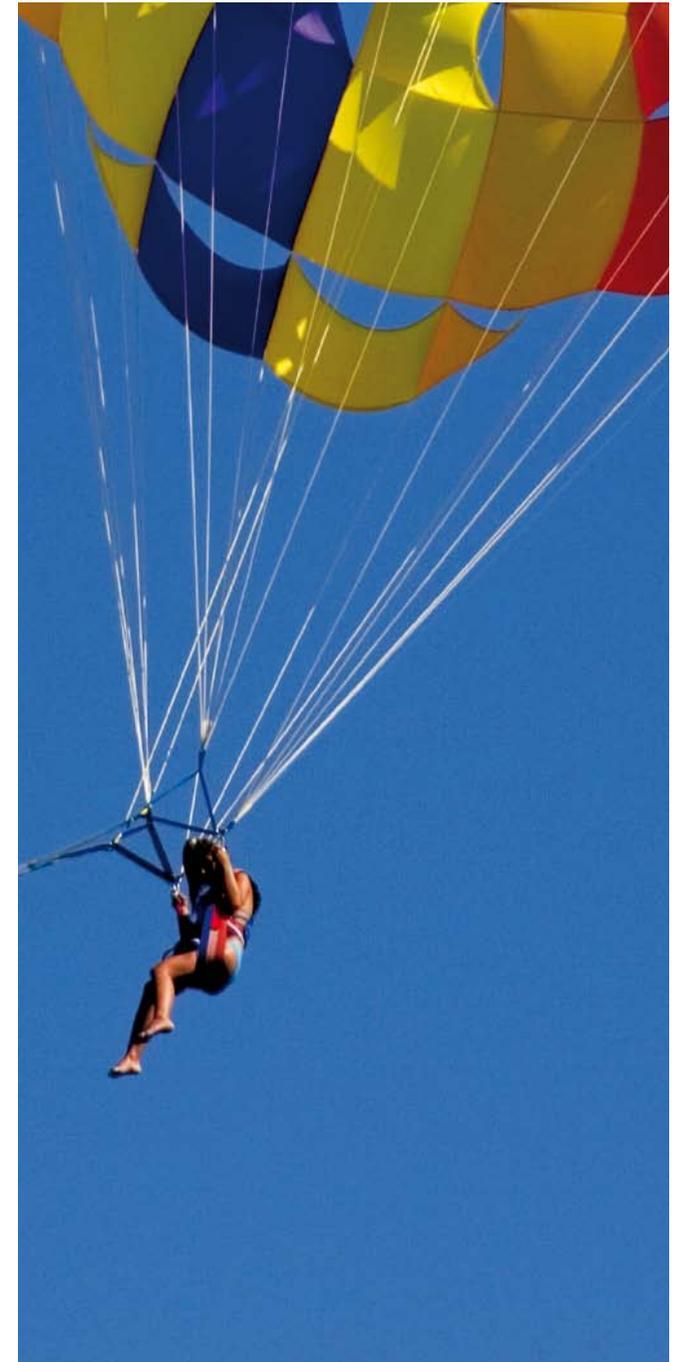


Own the words you speak, and the way you speak them. One way of doing this is to make them up on the spot. If you have no script then you clearly haven't hired a scriptwriter. Notes - of any kind - denote an amateur communicator or, worse, an inauthentic one.

If that is too scary (Why? You manage to string sentences together without knowing what comes next every hour of every day...) then find other ways to introduce some spontaneity. Read and respond to your audience's reactions. Speculate. Go off-piste.

By conveying that your presentation is a work in progress, not a finished product, you will be letting the audience know that the material is authentically yours.

Ditch the notes.



Design Matters

Take a look at the multi-billion dollar gaming industry, and you'll find Nintendo's Wii is the current phenomenon - it outsells its competitors two to one, despite allegedly inferior graphics. Why?

Because people like the look.

Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of the Wii's revolutionary controller, outlined the rationale behind the product like this:

“We were losing out to the TV remote. So we thought: what kind of controller can we create that won't make people afraid to touch it?”

The Wii looks different to its competitors in that it doesn't make a virtue of its own technological sophistication – rather, it conceals it. It looks so simple that a whole new generation - the over 60s - have been persuaded to try gaming for the first time.



Takeaway for you: the look of things matters. Specifically, simplicity is compelling. Simplicity, as a design principle, encourages engagement and trust.

Lose the chart junk, the bullet points, the logos, the templates, the pointless animations.

And take a look at Garr Reynold's brilliant [weblog](#), Presentation Zen. If you're serious about a design makeover, adopting some of Garr's ideas will have you looking like a professional communicator instead of a clipart chump in next to no time.

Obsess about the look of things.



And finally...

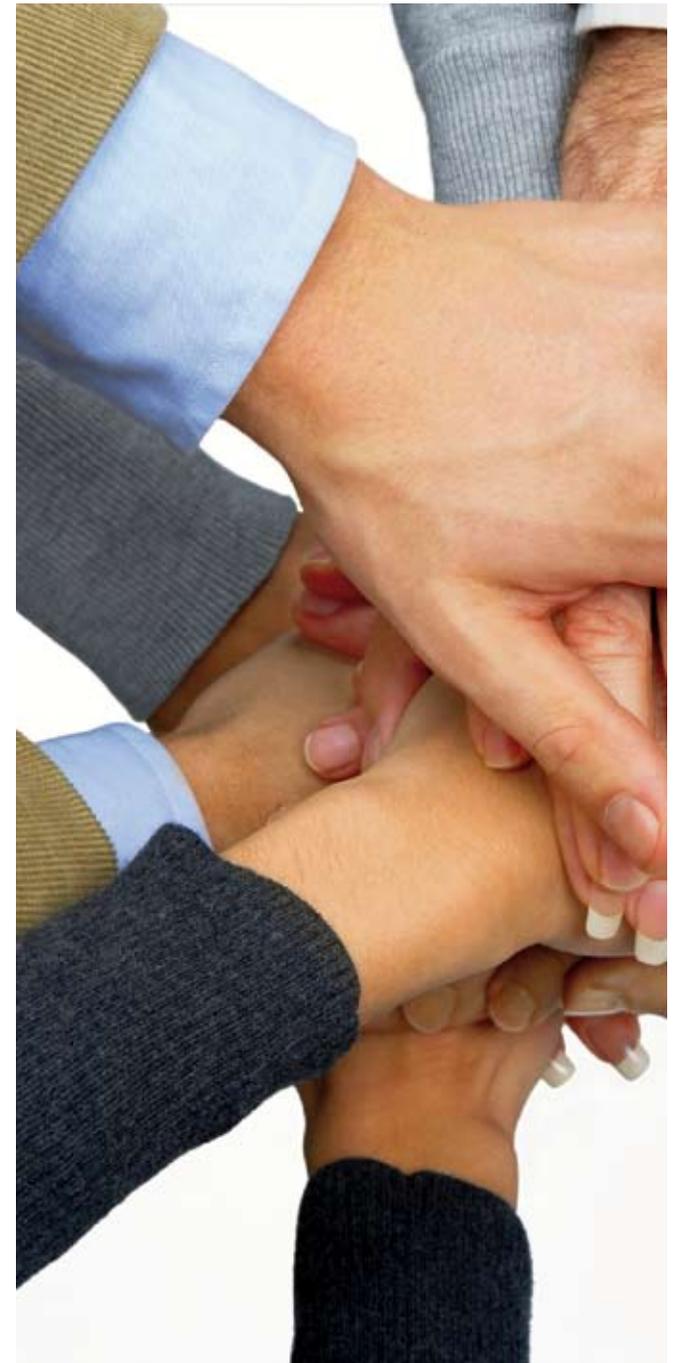
Conversation, not lecture

Fortune Magazine recently ran a cover story on Generation Y in the workplace. Its headline was “Manage Us? Puh-leeze.” A similar response is in store for any presenter who tries to lecture these Y-ers.

Generation Y matters, because it is almost certain to contain the talent you are most desperate to hire. Increasingly, it will constitute an important segment of your client base. So it makes sense to understand how to communicate with that precocious generation born in the era of Thatcher and Reagan.

Generation Y is responsible for the explosion in popularity of blogging, the vast majority of votes cast in TV shows like Pop Idol and the proliferation of websites like YouTube and Facebook.

The common theme is user-generated content.



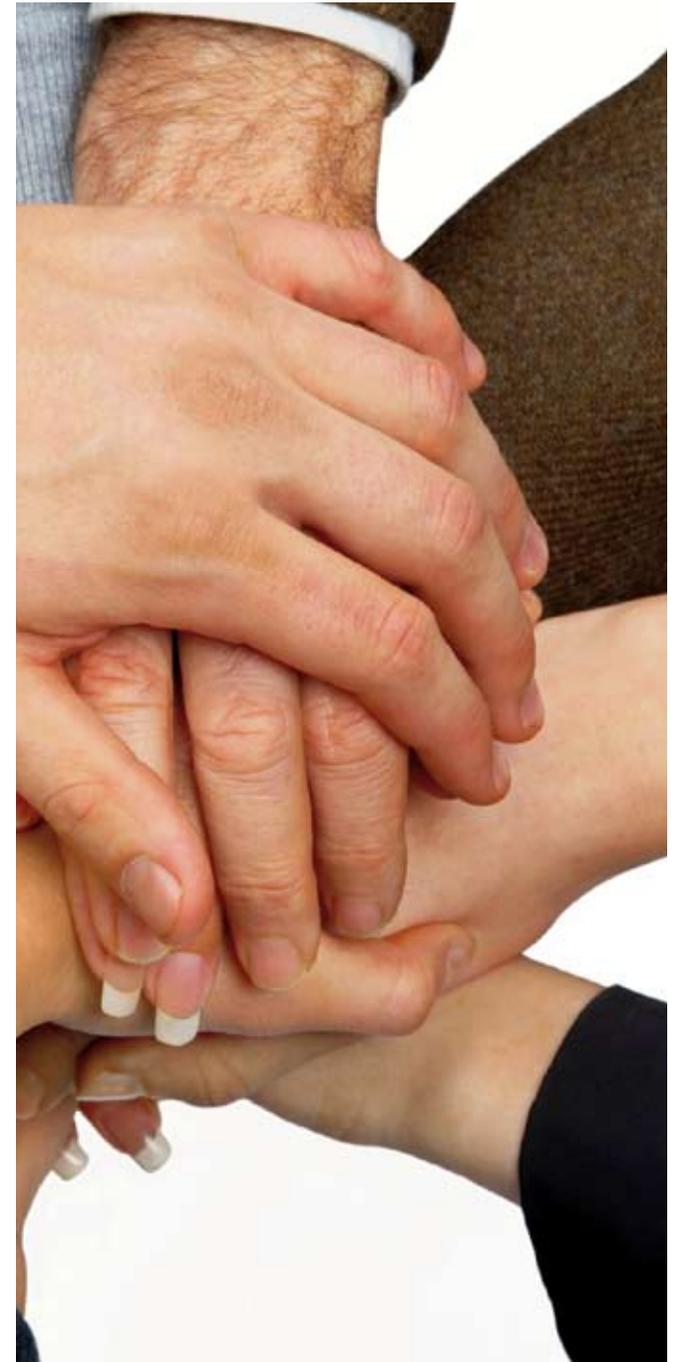
Today's audience expects co-billing with the presenter. Throughout popular culture, we are experiencing the rise of the audience as auteur, not spectator.

So the successful communicator will have to surrender the mantle of the expert and find ways for the audience to interact directly with the material. This could be through breakout groups, discussion of case studies or voting keypads.

Why not ask the audience some questions rather than endure those painful silent seconds waiting for them to ask you? Anything to ensure the audience gets *involved*.

Just about the only context in which the hour long monologue still reigns supreme is politics. Go figure.

Encourage interaction.



About the Author

Steven Pearce is a communication coach who works with professional clients worldwide. He helps clients craft a compelling message and deliver it with impact. For more information, visit the weblog **Common Ground**, email Steven at **commongrounduk@gmail.com** or call him on +44 (0)7941 124284.



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