

The 18-minute presentation

by Jim Gray

As your presentation plods into overtime and your stricken listeners start praying for sudden death – for your talk, or themselves, whatever comes first – it finally becomes apparent to you: Shorter is better.

With the amount of information we're forced to process growing larger every day, attention spans are contracting in lockstep. Most companies know it's becoming more difficult to engage and compel their audiences – and smart ones are doing something about it.

To wide acclaim, a global series of conferences known as TED (Technology Entertainment Design) has championed the 18-minute presentation – long enough to be taken seriously and short enough to hold the attention of listeners.

As a communication skills coach, I'm a big believer in the short game. Within five years, the 18-minute presentation will be the norm in business, not the exception.

And that's good news for you as a presenter. With fewer minutes to speak, you have more of an opportunity to make an impact – and be memorable. Here's how to make the most of your 18 minutes in the spotlight:

FOCUS ON THE 'WHY'

Audiences crave quality, not quantity. They're looking for educated opinions, insights and points of view. They're less interested in the "how" than in the "why."

Certainly, you need to provide enough contextual information for your audience to understand the subject or issue at hand. But the great thing about the "why" is that it invariably takes less time to explain than the "how," and makes you look smarter.

For example, the "why" behind a marketing strategy is much more interesting – and gives the speaker more credibility – than merely "how" it will be rolled out.

TELL A STORY

Many conventional presentations ramble on too long because speakers fear leaving out essential information. To remedy that concern, they include every bit of minutia even remotely related to their subject.

However, if you think of your presentation as a story, and commit to telling it in a compelling way, you'll be far more likely to include only material that advances your tale, or supports your theme.

Humans have been telling stories to each other for thousands of years. The system works. Use it.

BE CREATIVE

Even if you have significant amounts of detailed financial, technical or scientific information to communicate, the 18-minute presentation can still work wonderfully.

You can cover the key points, recommendations or lessons learned in your talk, and then cover the rest in handouts with the related data to your listeners.

Remember that accomplished speakers set themselves up to deliver high-value information, not to convey detailed, pedestrian material that is best read in written format.

If you're planning to use PowerPoint, consider creating two versions of your presentation – a simple, three-point-per-slide deck from which you'll present; and a handout version that replicates those points but also includes the more comprehensive information.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

The shorter a presentation, the better it needs to be organized. Use the time-tested “power of three” – introduction, body and conclusion – to structure your talk. Schedule three minutes for the introduction, 12 for the body (with four minutes for each of your three core points), and three for the conclusion.

If you're going with PowerPoint, have no more than a dozen slides. An identical title slide for your introduction and conclusion provides the backdrop for you to begin and end your presentation, with a nice sense of symmetry.

The introduction is where you establish your rationale and let your listeners know what you are going to be talking about. You don't need to speak to a slide for that.

The conclusion is where you summarize your remarks and lay down your call to action. You don't need to speak to a slide for that.

Of course, you really don't need to speak to any slides. The best presenters usually don't.

STAY ON TIME

However long you're scheduled to speak, you simply cannot go over your allotted time.

You can be a brilliant orator, but the moment you roll past your limit, your credibility begins to suffer. Today's audiences, with busy work lives, have less tolerance for speakers who lack the discipline and manners to stop at the appointed time.

Rehearse your talk often enough so that if your presentation time is reduced for whatever reason (perhaps a technical malfunction at the venue), you can still deliver your material with confidence and clarity. It's not about how long you speak. It's about how well you connect.