

[Top 10 Trainer's Tips For PMs Giving Presentations](#)

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The ability to give persuasive presentations is critical for PMs, and can mean the difference between getting your stakeholders with you or against you. Yet a lot of PMs make very common presenter's mistakes which can easily be avoided by using secrets of success known to many professional trainers.

Following are ten key tips from trainers that can carry over to PMs giving presentations for customers, team-members, management and other stakeholders. They come from the many presentations I have given as a PM to stakeholders, and also from my many years as a technical and corporate trainer. And they contain the collective wisdom of the hundreds of trainers I have coached toward certifications in technical training from Microsoft, CompTIA and Adobe.

TIP #1 – Don't just lecture – make it participatory

Problem: How many times have you been to a presentation where the PMs raced through all their slides, with little or no interaction from the participants? Many presenters create flashy, dancing slides, and then lecture away bouncing their slides off the screen and assuming that everyone is absorbing each slide like a scanner! The problem is that even if their participants are with them 100% on each slide (and often it's less than 100%!) most people don't retain the info long-term from an all-lecture delivery. (Think back to the last time you sat through 50 PowerPoint slides...how much of the content can you recall -- and apply -- right now?)

Solution: There are a lot of effective ways to get audience participation and increase retention, including hands-on exercises, interactive games, and simply asking good questions (see the several tips on questioning techniques below).

Also key is to avoid the common mistake of using PowerPoint only. (and no other medium). Instead of just slides, participants will much prefer it when you use a variety of media (white-board, smart board, video, audio, movie clips, live demos, simulations, live feeds, and interactive social media). PM World Today – December 2010 (Vol XII, Issue XII)

TIP #2 – Plan questions into your presentation

Problem: If you don't ask your audience questions, they will be less engaged, and consequently won't grasp your full content.

Solution: A secret for stimulating interest in your audience (and one that is low-tech and easy to use) is making sure to prepare some good questions that will lead your participants in the direction you want them to go. And you can "script" your questions – meaning to plan just where and when in your presentation you'll ask them.

And another trainer's trick is to build questions literally into your slides. People's eyes are instantly drawn to questions up on the screen. Also, this keeps you from forgetting to ask your questions. And the formality of putting them up on the slides shows your participants that the questions are well thought-out and worth spending time on.

TIP #3 – Ask questions that are "open-ended"

Problem: Some presenters like to ask questions such as:
"How many of you people have used the system before?" People answer "yes," and the presenter may feel

he or she has covered "the interaction thing." But this is called a "closed-ended question," because there are usually only two ways the participants can go with it: "yes" or "no." So those questions can actually be discussion-killers (the opposite of what you want). Because for many presenters, as soon as they see even one friendly hand or head-nod, they immediately jump back to their lecture, assuming all the participants are on board with the one who nodded "yes."

Solution: A better quality question is:

"From what we've discussed so far, can anyone see a way this feature / system / product specifically can help your customers?" Can you see a couple of ways where this kind of question is more useful? This is an example of an open-ended question, because it's open to each participant coming up with a different answer (from his or her own unique point-of-view).

Open-ended questions stimulate interest and lead your participants to PM World Today – want to dig deeper into your topic. They also get people to think WIFM (What's In it For Me?), which makes them more motivated to listen to and learn from your presentation

TIP #4 – Never say: "Please hold your questions until the Q&A at the end."

Problem: How many times have you heard a presenter say this, but then that magic time never comes, because the presenter runs out the clock rushing to get through his slides?

Solution: People are distracted and frustrated if they can't ask their questions when they want to ask them! And they also learn better when you're answering their questions (rather than just covering your agenda). It's recommended to plan in enough time for some unexpected questions that might come up during the body of the presentation (just like building in reserve time on a project). And it's always a nice touch to check in to make sure you've answered each question to the asker's satisfaction.

TIP #5 – Show that you really, really want questions from your audience!

Problem: Have you ever heard a presenter ask for questions in a way that discourages questions?

As an example, I'll ask you a question here:

Q. How many things can you find wrong with Approach #1 that are improved in Approach #2 (below)?

APPROACH #1: (Bad!)

"We have a great deal of material, and we're running a little late if we want to get through in time for lunch, which I think has already arrived by the way. But if anyone feels they need further clarification on anything I've already covered, I'll take just one question now."

Solution: To get people to ask you questions, you need to show them that you want their questions.

Here's another approach –

APPROACH #2 (Good!)

Put down your remote and marker, turn up the lights, and say: "OK, we've built a few minutes to take some questions at this point in the presentation. Who wants to ask a question on anything we've touched on so far?"

With Approach #2, you're creating an encouraging "space" where participants will feel their questions are valued and welcome. PM World Today – December

TIP #6 – Test all hardware & software in advance, AND have a backup plan!

Problem: How many times have you seen a presentation slightly tarnished (or more than slightly!) when an imbedded link didn't play, or a URL was broken, or the video played without the sound, or the presenter had trouble with the remote, the projector, a file, or security access?

Solution: These can all pose big problems when you're time-pressed giving a presentation, and can also undermine the presenter's credibility (because the participants will all know those problems could have been avoided with advance preparation).

The solution is the simplest of all the solutions in this Top 10 List -- you just need to put in the time testing your presentation in advance. You'll be able to easily fix any error you find. And if you don't find any, you'll be that much more confident and relaxed for the presentation. And for anything tricky, such as a live feed, don't just test – treat it like a project, and prepare in advance with a contingency plan. Then, even if you encounter a problem, you'll look like a "presentation warrior" when you smoothly fix it on the fly

TIP #7 – For bullet-points, follow the Rule of 6 X 6

Problem: Many presenters cram way too much text onto their slides, making them hard to read and uninviting to look at.

Solution: The first 6 here is to do your audience a favor and avoid putting more than 6 bullet points on a slide. This keeps it easy to read and easy on the eyes. Got more than 6? No problem: split them up into two slides! And what's the second 6? No more than 6 words per bullet, for the same reason: easy to read. But note that these are both guidelines, NOT absolutes – meaning you can occasionally go beyond the limits when needed, as long as you basically stick to the rule.

And with bullet points, it's usually a good idea to float them in one-at-a-time. It's usually a mistake to simply throw a bunch of bullets up on the screen at once (shotgun approach!) The participants don't know which PM World Today – one to look at first. And this makes the presenter tend to rush through them because he knows the participants are reading all of them at once. Floating them in helps you focus your audience on just the single piece of your content you want them to (which is the whole point of using bullets!)

TIP #8 – For PowerPoint, also follow the Rule of 10 X 20 X 30.

Problem: Maybe the biggest problem with PowerPoint presentations is too many slides crammed into a short time-frame.

Solution: Presentation guru Guy Kawasaki is credited with coining this rule, which specifies that an ideal presentation is 20 minutes max, and only 10 slides. And what's the 30? Kawasaki recommends 30 as the MINIMUM font size! This keeps things nice and big and easy to read from the back of the room.

And the large font helps keep the amount of text per slide to a minimum, which also encourages the use of graphics (see next tip).

TIP #9 – What's considered the ideal use of graphics in presentations nowadays?

Problem: Misuse of graphics can be distracting and counter-productive. A common mistake is to go overboard with pictures that are flashy and hop all around the screen, but which DON'T help drive home your concept.

Solution: The ideal slide is often a single graphic accompanied by just a few words of text. And a graphic should be chosen which best conveys that slide's message (not just because you think it looks cool!) Think of a cartoon in a newspaper, which is just a picture and caption - same idea!

TIP #10 – Use this "Formula For Success"

Problem: How should a presenter choose which is best: lecture versus live demo versus hands-on?

Solution: Many studies have shown that most people learn best by doing. So including a

hands-on exercise is ideal for many topics. But it's no fun for participants to be thrown into an exercise without knowing what is expected of them. So a good introduction is key for setting up the hands-on. And supplementing the intro with a live demo is ideal to further prepare your participants for the exercise. And so a rule-of-thumb is: Formula For Success = Overview + Demo + Hands-On

By planning correctly, you should usually be able to cover all three (even in a short session). Your overview and demo will prepare your participants for the hands-on, and the hands-on will be the part that really brings your presentation home for your participants.

About the Author



Jeff Furman is the author of: *The Project Management Answer Book*. This easy-to-use Q&A reference breaks the key concepts of PMBOK Version 4 down into bite-size pieces, and includes hundreds of hands-on tips and best practices for PMs. It also includes many proven study aids, unique diagrams and Top 10 lists to help PMs prepare for the PMP and related certification exams. With a foreword by best-selling PMP author **Andy Crowe**.

Jeff has 15 years experience managing IT projects for Fortune 500 financial firms in the NYC area. He has published articles on a wide range of I.T. and Project Management topics. He currently specializes in teaching PMP Prep, as well as Train-the-Trainer/Presentation Skills, helping instructors sharpen their skills and become certified by CompTIA (CTT+), Microsoft (MCT), and Adobe (ACI).

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