

Speaking legally



Speaking skills can be a considerable asset in developing your legal career or business, but there are many pitfalls to be avoided. Moira Beaton offers her top 10 tips for successful delivery

Lawyers are not only professionals with the challenge of practising law, they are also business people and one of the most effective ways they have of establishing themselves as experts and creating the "know, like, trust" in potential clients or referral sources is by speaking in public.

Lawyers attend networking meetings, speak at conferences, give talks to the general public and speak to the media. Every time they speak, they are representing their firm. Their listeners not only judge them by what they say and how they say it, they also make up their minds about the firm and whether or not they want to do business with it.

A contract, a successful tender or a referral may depend on a lawyer's ability to address an audience. It makes sense, therefore, to become skilful at speaking in public.

If, as a lawyer, your intention is just to convey the bare facts to your listeners, you could recite them from your notes or send them by email. If, on the other

hand, your intention is to persuade, motivate, educate or inform your listeners so that they change their view, learn something new or take action, your words not only have to be heard, they have to be received.

In this article, I will outline the basic skills everyone needs to deliver well-structured presentations using clear, compelling language that will engage your listeners and achieve the results you want.

A question I have been asked many times is "What is more important – content or delivery?" The answer is – both. The most valuable content can be lost if the audience is not engaged, and entertainment without content is just a skilful performance. To make a presentation interesting and effective, there has to be a balance.

A study was carried out where an audience listened to two speakers. The first had lots of valuable content, which he delivered in a blizzard of words. The second speaker had excellent delivery, but his content was a string of well-worn platitudes. When the audience was asked which speaker

they preferred, the researchers were shocked to discover that 70% preferred the second speaker – the one who said nothing. The first speaker's content was lost on them because of poor delivery.

The following 10 steps will help you structure and deliver compelling presentations and make sure your valuable content is never ignored.

1. Be yourself

I can't stress this enough. Improving your speaking skills does not mean becoming an actor. The audience will know if you are just going through the motions and you may damage your credibility. Everyone has their own style.

2. Your audience

It's essential that you connect with your listeners. Find out what motivates them, what they need, how you can help them. Tailor your presentation to reflect those needs. If you speak to an audience you know nothing about, you may be met with boredom, irritation or questions you can't answer.

3. Your purpose

- What is the purpose of your presentation and what you intend to do for the audience – inform, educate, persuade, motivate, entertain?
- What is your message? If you cannot state your message clearly, in one sentence, work on it until you can. After that, everything in your presentation must relate to it. If it doesn't, remove it.

4. Prepare

Advance preparation is the key to a successful presentation and the more thoroughly you prepare, the better. However, sometimes if you are short of time and you know your subject well, you may get by with an outline. Depending on the length of your presentation, the outline should include:

- three to five main points, broken down into subpoints with each subpoint supported by material such as statistics, examples, stories, facts or opinions;
- transitional words or phrases to connect the points and help your audience move smoothly through the presentation;
- an attention-getting opening and a memorable conclusion.

5. Practise

This is to help internalise your ideas, not memorise every word. The only

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exceptions are your opening and closing. Keep them short and memorise them. This will guard against faltering at the beginning, which can derail you, and hesitation at the end, which can undermine what you already said.

- Practise your presentation as if you were explaining your ideas to a friend. Aim to sound natural and conversational.
- Practise speaking and using your slides, if you can, especially if it is the first time you have delivered a presentation with slides.
- Time yourself to make sure you don't run over on the day. If you ramble, you will lose the audience's

attention and also run the risk of being cut short before you have had time to finish properly. Speaking rates range from 120 (slow) to 160 words a minute (this is fast, the rate at which broadcast journalists speak). Aim for about 130 words per minute and factor in a few extra minutes for unexpected interruptions or technical hitches. If your time allocation includes questions from the audience, decide how much time you want to give to the Q&A session and stick to it.

6. Open for impact, close to be remembered

- When you open, you have 30 seconds to get your audience's attention. Do not lose the opportunity by thanking your hosts (work it into your presentation later), fiddling with your notes, clearing your throat or apologising – for anything. Good openings can include a quotation that is relevant to the rest of your talk, a surprising statistic, a question (actual or rhetorical), a case study or a story that demonstrates the importance of your message.
- Your conclusion is your final opportunity to make a lasting impression, so close with a strong statement your audience will remember. If your purpose was to inform, tell them what you already told them at the beginning. If it was to persuade, end with a call to action. If it was to entertain, end with humour. In all cases, tying your closing to your beginning is a neat way to end. Your final slide should be blank or turned off altogether – at this point, you want the audience's attention on you, not on the screen behind you.

7. Watch your language

Help the audience remember by:

- using simple, specific, vivid language and repeating your message regularly throughout your presentation;
- illustrating important points with stories and case studies to engage the audience's emotions as well as their intellect;
- using devices such as metaphors, similes and triads and don't be afraid to use humour, where appropriate.

8. Body language

- Don't distract from your message with darting eyes, fiddling with your pen or ring or nervously pacing the floor. Only move with purpose.
- During your opening and closing,

and whenever you make an important point, stand still, face your audience and speak from a position of strength. You will look and feel more confident.

- Hand gestures and facial expressions cannot be learned and will arise naturally when you are speaking from your heart and not from your head.
- Lack of eye contact can make you look either nervous or untrustworthy. Make eye contact with your listeners, one at a time, for a few seconds, then move on to the next one.
- Smile. It creates rapport with your listeners and makes you look relaxed and confident.

9. Clear the clutter

Be aware of your "verbal clutter" and try to eliminate it as much as possible. Too many noises and fillers in your speech are like an annoying background hum that prevents your words coming through loud and clear. Get rid of:

- sounds such as um, ah, er, ehm;
- words such as "actually", "obviously", "so";
- empty phrases such as "in point of fact", "well, to be honest", "at the end of the day".

10. Visual aids

Visual aids should be the supporting cast, not the star of the show. Draft your presentation first and then decide which points will be enhanced by slides.

- Use no more than six lines of text and no more than six words per line.
- Make sure they are visible to everyone in the room – check your font.
- Don't talk to the screen, talk to the audience.

When lawyers go out of their offices, they are ambassadors for the firm. As a lawyer, speaking in public enables you to demonstrate your firm's brand and ethos to many people at once.

Today's market is competitive and speaking in public is an essential skill that can open many doors. With planning, practice and perseverance, anyone can deliver effective, memorable presentations to create a favourable, lasting impression and be remembered. ■

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