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ARTICLE **PRESENTATIONS**

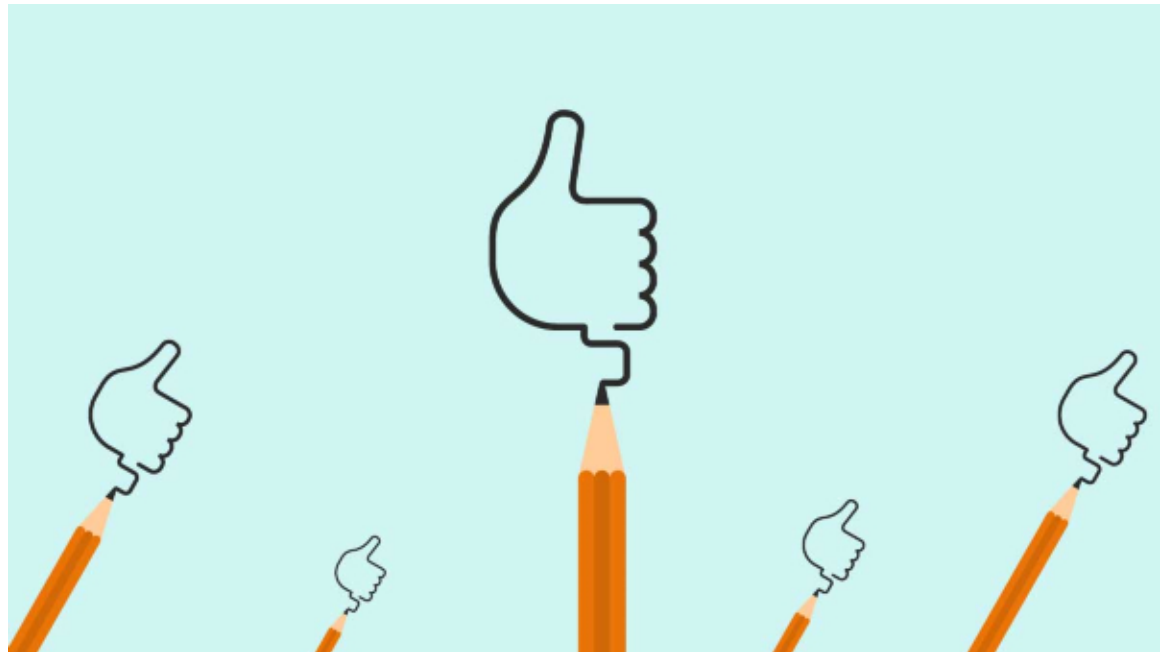
A Checklist for More Persuasive Presentations

by Dorie Clark

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We all know the basics of good presentation skills: [don't read from a script](#); don't overwhelm your audience with verbose slides; and the like. But for a particular kind of high-stakes presentation — one in which you're trying to [get buy-in](#) from key decision-makers — those basics aren't enough.

To persuade the people who have the power to approve your idea or let it die, you need to start with a strong outline. Here are the questions to ask yourself so you can structure a presentation, from the outset, that defuses potential objections upfront and is so compelling a “yes” becomes far more likely.

What's the problem you're solving? Too often, even experienced professionals start their presentation by talking about the solution they're offering. But if you're presenting to outsiders, or even high-level leaders inside your company, they may not have been following the development process of your project very closely. If you don't explain the context and why it matters upfront, you risk them tuning out early on because they're not sure if your idea is relevant.

Why now? The problem may be relevant — but they've been just fine avoiding it up until this point. Why is this the moment they should change what's been working? Why do they need to take immediate action? Until you prove to them that the problem is urgent, and will continue to get worse unless you address it, their inclination will be to “wait and see” or prioritize other things first. Make sure you've clearly explained the cost of not taking action.

How has the idea been vetted? You may have spent two years working on this project. But the CEO or the board may not fully appreciate the depth of your effort, so it's useful to contextualize it for them. This doesn't mean spending five minutes bragging about your past accomplishments, but you want to highlight evidence of your competence and the seriousness with which you pursued this solution. For instance, it's worth mentioning that your team interviewed 100 leading researchers to identify the best practices you're recommending, or that you ran three pilots to test the concept. As you outline, make sure you build in this critical element upfront.

Have you simplified the structure? You're so familiar with your idea, even very complex facets of it now seem obvious to you. But that won't be the case for people hearing it the first time. Ask yourself how you can clarify and simplify the information you're presenting, perhaps into a series of numbered steps or phases. For instance, the process of how to reinvent yourself professionally may feel overwhelming. But in my book *Reinventing You*, I describe a three-phase process of discovering your brand, creating your brand, and living your brand that helps readers break an involved process into discrete steps so they feel comfortable taking action. That enables the audience to grasp a complex solution more readily, and inspires more confidence in the path you're proposing. It also has the added benefit of providing an overarching structure for the meat of your presentation.

Have you included a story? Some professions — engineering comes to mind — embrace a “just the facts, ma'am” approach, rich with statistics but devoid of stories. It may seem frivolous or pandering if you're not used to presentations that feature illustrative anecdotes, but you're putting yourself at a significant disadvantage if you don't [use storytelling](#) as part of your toolkit. That doesn't mean concocting treacly leadership fables. But it does mean recognizing that a piece of data can become more powerful if you pair it with a concrete example to help others visualize what you're talking about. Make sure your outline includes at least one story to enliven your presentation.

Have you included a call to action? The final place most professionals go wrong in their presentations is failing to present a clear call to action at the end. The next step may be obvious to you — invest in our company, or approve the budget for the full-scale launch. But it's rarely that clear to the audience, which is hearing the pitch for the first time. If you've done your job up to this point, they'll

be on your side. Now you can clarify for them exactly what action they can take to show their support. Make sure you've built this element into your outline.

Presentations are critical for most professionals, yet too much emphasis is often placed on how your slides look or where you're standing on stage. Of course aesthetics and theatrics matter — but your content is at the heart of whether you win or lose in the moment. If you outline your presentation to ensure you cover these bases, you're far more likely to get the audience on your side quickly and achieve the result you desire.

Dorie Clark is a [marketing strategist and professional speaker](#) who teaches at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. She is the author of *Reinventing You* and *Stand Out*. You can receive her free [Stand Out Self-Assessment Workbook](#).
