

Presenting Your Ideas to Others

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Presenting your ideas to others effectively involves being proficient in three aspects of communication: meeting your needs and your listener's needs, structuring your message so it is easy to follow, and bringing your ideas to life.

Needs: You as the speaker have legitimate needs to be met: you have an idea you want to present, a problem you want to solve, a solution you want to propose, an opinion you want to express. You have a reason for entering into the interaction and want a positive response from your listeners. Your listeners also have legitimate needs: they want you to deliver your message clearly and concisely; make it relevant to them; and listen to their response. They need to have a reason to engage in the interaction and to respond positively.

Three factors influence your effectiveness to meet needs: substance, response, and image. Before your next presentation to the partners, the associates, your clients, or your colleagues, be clear in your own mind about what substance you want to convey, what response you want to evoke, and what image you want to project. Then craft your message accordingly. This will help you meet needs and increase your influence.

Structure: Structuring your message so it is easy to follow is particularly important in accounting, which involves many complex, difficult-to-explain topics. Often people start with details and move to the main point—losing their listeners in the process. It is more effective to determine a central theme for your message, support it with several key points, and state the action you want your listeners to take. This prevents the “so what” syndrome in listeners: they hear a lot of detail, don't know where the speaker is going with it, and think “so what.” By the time the speaker gets to the “so what,” frequently the listeners have tuned out and missed the point.

An easy-to-follow structure involves using transitions to help listeners move with you from one point to another. An example of a transition is “... so those are the common problems family-owned businesses run into when they transfer their businesses to the next generation; now let's look at how succession planning can help you avoid those problems.” A transition summarizes one point and announces the next point. Pay attention to structure so people can follow you easily.

Interest: Bringing your ideas to life so they are interesting is challenging with topics such as financial statements, contracting issues, cost segregation, etc. These may not seem inherently exciting, but each of them is valuable to the right client at the right time.

Understanding them can help a client save time, money, or aggravation—and most clients are interested in that.

Connect the topic to your listeners and show them how they can benefit from the information you are giving and action you are suggesting. Too often things are explained “in general” when listeners want it explained “in specific” to them. For example, the principles of financial statements may not change but the implications of what is in those statements do change with every client. By stopping periodically and saying “what this means for you is ...” or “in relationship to others in your industry, this shows that you ...” you’ll be better able to hold your listeners’ attention.

Analogies, which enable you to relate the familiar to the unfamiliar, not only help listeners understand complex topics, they make your message more interesting. For example, if you are talking to your physician clients about the importance of understanding contracts they sign with insurance companies, you could make an analogy to purchasing a home. Just as they should examine the elements that will affect the quality and functioning of the home—the electrical, plumbing, design, etc., they should examine the elements that will affect the quality and functioning of the contract--the physician fee schedule, term provisions, gag clauses, etc. The more interesting you can make your message, the better your chances of stimulating the response you want.

Communicating well with others is the heart of bringing in business, satisfying clients, and building working relationships. The better you are at making the complex understandable, the dry interesting, and the mundane exciting, the more successful you and your firm will be. When presenting your ideas to others, develop skill in meeting both your and your listener’s needs, structure your message so it is easy to follow, and bring your ideas to life in an interesting way. You and your listeners will be glad you did.