Organization & Preparation Tips

1. Start with the end in mind

Before you even open up PowerPoint, sit down and really think about the day of your presentation. What is the real purpose of your talk? Why is it that you were ask to speak? What does the audience expect? In your opinion, what are the most important parts of your topic for the audience to take away from your, say, 50-minute presentation? Remember, even if you've been asked to share information, rarely is the mere transfer of information a satisfactory objective from the point of view of the audience. After all, the audience could always just read your book (or article, handout, etc.) if information transfer were the only purpose of the meeting, seminar, or formal presentation.

2. Know your audience as well as possible

Before you begin to formulate the content of your presentation, you need to ask yourself many basic questions with an eye to becoming the best possible presenter for that particular audience. At the very least, you need to answer the basic "W questions."

- **Who is the audience?** What are their backgrounds? How much background information about your topic can you assume they bring to the presentation?
- **What is the purpose of the event?** Is it to inspire? Are they looking for concrete practical information? Do they want more concepts and theory rather than advice?
- **Why were you asked to speak?** What are their expectations of you?
- **Where is it?** Find out everything you can about the location and logistics of the venue.
- **When is it?** Do you have enough time to prepare? What time of the day? If there are other presenters, what is the order (always volunteer to go first or last, by the way). What day of the week? All of this matters.

3. Content, content, content

No matter how great your delivery, or how professional and beautiful your supporting visuals, if your presentation is not based on solid content, you can not succeed. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that great content alone will carry the day. It almost never does. Great content is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. But your presentation preparation starts with solid content (appropriate for your audience) which you then build into a winning story that you'll use to connect with your audience.

A word of caution: Though I am emphasizing how important content is, I also am begging you to spare your audience a "data dump." A data dump — all too common unfortunately — is when a presenter crams too much information into the talk without making the effort to make the information or data applicable to the members of the audience. A data dump also occurs when data and information do not seem to build on the information that came earlier in the presentation. Sometimes it almost seems that the presenter is either showing off, or more likely, is simply afraid that if he does not tell the "whole story" by giving reams of data, the audience will not understand his message.

Do not fall into the trap of thinking that in order for your audience to understand anything, you must tell them everything. Which brings us to the idea of simplicity.
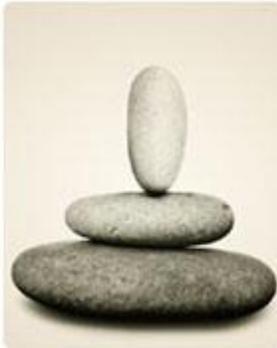
4. Keep it simple

Simple does not mean stupid. Frankly, thinking that the notion of simplifying is stupid is just plain, well, "stupid." Simple can be hard for the presenter, but it will be appreciated by the audience. Simplicity takes more forethought and planning on your part because you have to think very hard about what to include and what can be left out. What is the essence of your message? This is the ultimate question you need to ask yourself during the preparation of your presentation. Here's a simple exercise:

EXERCISE:

If your audience could remember only three things about your presentation, what would you want it to be?

(1)_____

(2)_____

(3)_____

5. Outlining your content

I suggest you start your planning in "analog mode." That is, rather than diving right into PowerPoint (or Keynote), the best presenters often scratch out their ideas and objectives with a pen and paper. Personally, I use a large whiteboard in my office to sketch out my ideas (when I was at Apple, I had one entire wall turned into a whiteboard!). The whiteboard works for me as I feel uninhibited and freer to be creative. I can also step back (literally) from what I have sketched out and imagine how it might flow logically when PowerPoint is added later. Also, as I write down key points and assemble an outline and structure, I can draw quick ideas for visuals such as charts or photos that will later appear in the PowerPoint. Though you may be using digital technology when you deliver your presentation, the act of speaking and connecting to an audience — to persuade, sell, or inform — is very much analog.

Cliff Atkinson in his 2005 book, "Beyond Bullet Points," smartly states that starting to create your presentation in PowerPoint before you have your key points and logical flow first worked out (on paper or a white board in my case) is like a movie director hiring actors and starting to film before there is a script in hand.

More on "planning analog"
I usually use a legal pad and pen (or a whiteboard if there is enough space) to create a rough kind of storyboard. I find the analog approach stimulates my creativity a bit more as I said. No software to get in my way and I can easily see how the flow will go. I draw sample images that I can use to support a particular point, say, a pie chart here, a photo there, perhaps a line graph in this section and so on. You may be thinking that this is a waste of time: why not just go into PowerPoint and create your images there so you do not have to do it twice? Well, the fact is, if I tried to create a storyboard in PowerPoint, it would actually take longer as I would constantly have to go from normal view to slide sorter view to see the "whole picture." The analog approach (paper or whiteboard) to sketch out my ideas and create a rough storyboard really helps solidify and simplify my message in my own head. I then have a far easier time laying out those ideas in PowerPoint. I usually do not even have to look at the whiteboard or legal pad when I am in PowerPoint, because the analog process alone gave a clear visual image of how I want the content to flow. I glance at my notes to remind me of what visuals I thought of using at certain points and then go to iStockphoto.com or to my own extensive library of high-quality stock images to find the perfect image.

6. Have a sound, clear structure

Take a page out out the McKinsey presentation handbook: presentation structure is paramount. Without it, your wonderful style, delivery and great supporting visuals will fall flat. If you took the time in the first step to outline your ideas and set them up in a logical fashion, then your thinking should be very clear. You can visualize the logic of your content and the flow of the presentation. If your ideas are not clear first, it will be impossible to design the proper structure later when you create visuals and/or supporting documents. Your audience needs to see where you are going. And it is not enough to simply have an "agenda" or "road map" slide in the beginning that illustrates the organization of your talk. If you do not actually have a solid road of logic and structure, then an outline slide will be of no use. In fact, the audience may become even more irritated since you made the promise of organization in the

beginning, but then failed to deliver the promise with a presentation which is muddled and lacks focus.

7. Dakara nani? (so what?)

In Japanese I often say to myself, "dakara nani?" or "sore de...?" which translate roughly as "so what?!" or "your point being...?" I say this often while I am preparing my material. When building the content of your presentation always put yourself in the shoes of the audience and ask "so what?" Really ask yourself the tough questions throughout the planning process. For example, is your point relevant? It may be cool, but is it important or help your story in a very important way...or is it fluff? Surely you have been in an audience and wondered how what the presenter was talking about was relevant or supported his point. "So what?" you probably said to yourself. "So what?" — always be asking yourself this very important, simple question. If you can't really answer that question, then cut that bit of content out of your talk.

8. Can you pass the "elevator test"?

Check the clarity of your message with the elevator test. This exercise forces you to "sell" your message in 30-45 seconds. Imagine this is the situation: You have been scheduled to pitch a new idea to the head of product marketing at your company, one of the leading technology manufactures in the world. Both schedules and budgets are tight; this is an extremely important opportunity for you if you are to succeed at getting the OK from the executive team. When you arrive at the Admin desk outside the vice-president's office, suddenly she comes out with her coat and briefcase in hand and barks, "...sorry, something's come up, give me your pitch as we go down to the lobby..." Imagine such a scenario. Could you sell your idea in the elevator ride and a walk to the parking lot? Sure, the scenario is unlikely, but possible. What is very possible, however, is for you to be asked without notice to shorten your talk down, from, say, 20 minutes, to 10 minutes (or from a scheduled one hour to 30 minutes), could you do it? True, you may never have to, but practicing what you might do in such a case forces you to get your message down and make your overall content tighter and clearer.

Author, Ron Hoff ("I Can See You Naked") reminds us that your presentation should be able to pass the David Belasco test while you're in the planning stages. David Belasco was a producer who insisted that the core idea for every successful play he produced could be written as a simple sentence on the back of a business card. Try it. Can you crystallize the essence of your presentation content and write it on the back of a business card? If the task is

impossible for you, then you may want to think again and get your message down pat in your mind. This too is certainly something you do before you ever begin to open up PowerPoint (Keynote).

9. The art of story telling

Good presentations include stories. The best presenters illustrate their points with the use of stories, most often personal ones. The easiest way to explain complicated ideas is through examples or by sharing a story that underscores the point. Stories are easy to remember for your audience. If you want your audience to remember your content, then find a way to make it relevant and memorable to them. You should try to come up with good, short, interesting stories or examples to support your major points.

In addition, it is useful to think of your entire 30 minute presentation as an opportunity to "tell a story." Good stories have interesting, clear beginnings, provocative, engaging content in the middle, and a clear, logical conclusion. I have seen pretty good (though not great) presentations that had very average delivery and average graphics, but were relatively effective because the speaker told relevant stories in a clear, concise manner to support his points. Rambling streams of consciousness will not get it done; audiences need to hear (and see) your points illustrated.

10. Confidence — How to get it

The more you are on top of your material the less nervous you will be. If you have taken the time to build the logical flow of your presentation, designed supporting materials that are professional and appropriate, there is much less to be nervous about. And, if you have then actually rehearsed with an actual computer and projector (assuming you are using slideware) several times, your nervousness will all but melt away. We fear what we do not know. If we know our material well and have rehearsed the flow, know what slide is next in the deck, and have anticipated questions, then we have eliminated much (but not all) of the unknown. When you remove the unknown and reduce anxiety and nervousness, then confidence is something that will naturally take the place of your anxiety.