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Opportunity: It's All in the Presentation

Communications Teams Often Miss Chance to Mine Chemistry With Client

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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No matter how many times I go through the drill, it never ceases to amaze me how truly valuable presentation situations are in building relationships with clients.

Presentations create a variety of opportunities on which the communications team can build. But while most teams do a good job attacking at least two of the opportunities created by presentation situations, they fail to capture the value in others.

For example, presentations provide an excellent stage for the communications team to demonstrate how well it can flex its creative muscles. Ideas are the centerpiece of most presentations, and they cue the second opportunity: the opportunity to sell. Account folks relish the opportunity to sell quality ideas and the services needed to implement them.

Frequently, however, communications teams don't try to accomplish much more in presentations than bringing ideas to the table

and selling them. There is another valuable opportunity inherent in presentation situations of which teams should always try to take advantage: the opportunity to build chemistry between the team and client.

Why is chemistry important? Consider one oft-suggested advertising truism: Chemistry is key to establishing initial marketing partnerships and critical to keeping established relationships vital over time. Chemistry is a relationship facilitator. It is also present, sometimes tangibly, in presentation situations. As such, media planning teams would be silly not to take advantage of its power in presentations.

When was the last time you took a step back and refreshed your memory of best practices you learned for presentation situations? While we all have been through presentation skills training sessions, it's likely that if we all compared notes we'd find many similarities in the best practices we've all learned.

If we further considered that list, we'd probably realize how much of a contribution many of those best practices make to building chemistry between speakers and audience members in presentation circumstances.

Of the many we could list, here are six presentation best-practices areas that, applied correctly, contribute significantly toward mining chemistry positively to build relationships.

Set Up

Preparing presentation space to better facilitate chemistry-building is important. There are some simple things a team can do to maximize success. Arrive at the presentation venue early to eliminate potential hiccups. Create your own "pre-flight" checklist to go over before the presentation.

Make sure the space is laid out to maximum advantage. Where do you want clients or prospects placed around the table? Where is the presentation screen positioned? Where are the best sightlines to the presentation screen for key clients? Make sure you know exactly where you want key clients positioned for best interaction potential with presenters.

Where are the electrical outlets? Are presentation devices set up and working properly? If teleconference equipment is to be used, is it working properly? Allow enough transit time to arrive at the destination promptly.

Speaker Positioning

Western society is used to reading information left to right. Speaker(s) should be on the left acting as the conduit into ideas presented at their left hand. Positioned in this way, the speaker guides the audience into the information. Audience (client) eyes will focus on the speaker and move left to right from the speaker to the information, linking the speaker to the information and creating an anchor point from which to build chemistry.

As you assess the presentation space, try to account for the left-hand side. If many presenters are scheduled, each should remember to move to the left side when taking up the speaking position during the presentation.

Simple Content

Some presenters feel that all of what they need to say should be on the slides, but cramming too much information onto slides is a detriment to building chemistry. Expansive information prompts the speaker to read from the slides, but the audience can do that themselves. Meanwhile, when a speaker is reading from the screen, an opportunity is being missed to look audience members squarely in the eye and build chemistry.

Further, a presenter does not want the audience to invest too much time reading information from the screen. From a content perspective, too much time reading increases the chance that the core thought or idea will be missed in the mass of information. And if the audience is staring at words, it isn't focusing on the presenter, meaning a lost chemistry opportunity.

Good presenters need only headlines and quick bullet points. They can keep the details in their head and verbalize them as they present, maintaining focus on the audience and audience focus on them. This is a much better way of building credibility and conveying the importance of ideas, and it allows the presenter's energy and charisma to contribute to the chemistry-building process.

In slides, use pictures and graphs to replace words whenever possible. There is a reason the phrase "a picture paints a thousand words" is a cliché: it's true. Visual images can be grasped quickly and with significant depth.

It might take more time to verbalize or read enough words to communicate the same idea. If a visual can do the job more effectively, use it and move attention back to the presenter more quickly. The more attention on the speaker, the more opportunity for chemistry.

Addressing the Audience

When speaking, looking the audience in the eye creates a connection. Many presentation practitioners will counsel presenters to look at focal points around the room or just over the top of the audience's heads. This is primarily to help presenters alleviate nervousness. Unfortunately, this practice doesn't help a presenter form a substantive link with the audience; connection is what creates the chemistry.

Looking audience members in the eye is just half of the chemistry opportunity; listening to what they have to say in a manner that fixes your attention on them is the other half. Attentive listening gives a presenter better focus on what audience members are saying, along with insight that comes from reading body language. Attending to them pointedly conveys a lot about how much the listener really cares about or is interested in what is being communicated.

If the presenter is not looking the audience in the eye, another problem can result that undermines chemistry. There's a good chance that eye contact can't happen because the presenter is reading from the screen. Reading from the screen should be avoided because verbalized content and volume are directed sideways to the screen instead of outward to the audience.

The audience might not hear, detracting from content being understood. Further, audience members will subconsciously note that focus is toward the screen and not them. Subtle and subconscious? Yes. A detriment to building chemistry? Definitely. Focus energy where it belongs: outward to the audience.

Movement

Nervous energy prompts movement. When presenters are nervous, they move around and the audience senses the discomfort. It's hard to build credibility for an idea if you appear nervous in presenting it. It's also hard to build chemistry with audience members when energy is directed into nervous movement rather than outward to the audience. The best way to facilitate credibility and chemistry is to minimize movement and focus (even nervous) energy outward into conveying information and grabbing the audience's attention via eye contact.

Taking Questions

As is echoed in the work of people like Stephen Covey, listening to what questioners say or ask is incredibly important. It gives the presenter ability to understand both the question and the demeanor of the questioner. Too many presenters take questions as an attack on their content. While that may sometimes be true, for every question there is an opportunity to get behind what it is the questioner really feels.

Conveying back to the questioner a paraphrase of their question is a good practice. A couple of things are accomplished by this. First, time is bought to grasp the breadth of the question and formulate an answer. Second, when the questioner hears the paraphrased query, he feels that the question was truly understood.

If the presenter can better understand, questions are answered with more impact. Better answered questions underscore why presentations are powerful and appropriate. Those answers also reflect a more thoughtful, understanding response that will resonate with audience members and build chemistry.

So the next time your planning team heads off for a presentation, strengthen your effort by taking advantage of presentation best practices that can help build positive chemistry between you and your client. That positive chemistry might be just what the doctor ordered to win the business or keep a longtime relationship growing and vital.

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