

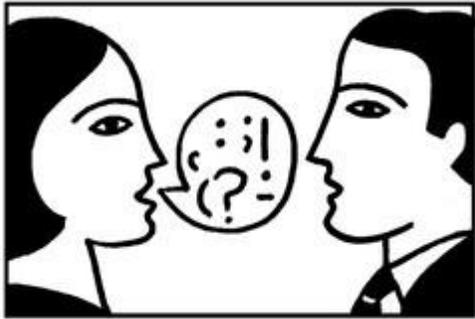
# Practice Makes for a Perfect Presentation

by Jerry Weisman, Presentations Coach

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I'm often invited to conferences to give a presentation on "how to give a presentation." I usually deliver the same basic subject matter, but I adapt it to the interests of each audience. I've done this for more than two decades now, so I'm very familiar with my content.

But I still practice for each presentation, using a technique that I recommend to every client I've ever coached: verbalization. This means that you should speak your presentation aloud in advance just as you plan to do it with your actual audience, and you should do it several times. This method has analogues in sports, music and theater, and of course even has its own classic adage: Practice makes perfect.



If you verbalize your presentation just as you will be delivering it on stage, you will reinforce the correct words.

Unfortunately, the way that most business people rehearse their presentations is by clicking through their PowerPoint slides and saying something like, "OK, with this slide I'm going to say a bit about our sales revenues...and with this one, I'll talk about our path to profitability...and then I'll show a picture of our lab and talk a little about R&D."

Sound familiar? As a form of rehearsal, it's completely unproductive. Talking about your presentation is no more effective a way to practice it than talking about tennis would be a good way to improve your backhand.

An even more common form of practice is mumbling. The presenter clicks through the slides on the computer or flips through a hard copy of them while muttering unintelligible words, "Blah, blah, blah...."

But this method just reinforces negative behavior. If you mumble your way through your practice presentation, you're likely to do the same in front of your actual audience. If instead you verbalize your presentation just as you will be delivering it on stage, you will reinforce the correct words.

There have been instances when I've failed to follow my own rules, and I've paid for the transgression.

One of the major investment banks has invited me to speak at its annual conference at the Inn at Spanish Bay in Pebble Beach, Calif., on four separate occasions. The agenda was the same for all four conferences, so all four of my presentations covered similar content.

For the first three conferences, I practiced my presentation aloud several times in the car during the nearly two-hour drive from my office in Silicon Valley to the resort. (Thankfully, the advent of Bluetooth has made speaking out loud to myself in the car appear less strange to other drivers on the road.)

Just as I was about to leave for the fourth conference, however, an important business issue arose, and I had to spend most of my time in the car on my mobile phone, dealing with the matter—with no time to rehearse my presentation.

When I got to the hotel and stepped up to the dais to speak, my familiarity with the content didn't help. One of the key techniques that I recommend to my clients is to use verbal linkages to create a smooth flow. But I stumbled on my usual linkages, and my delivery was choppy. I'm a professional presentations coach and I was covering familiar content, but I stumbled because I hadn't followed my own advice.

So do as I say, not as I did on the way to Spanish Bay: Rehearse the right way by verbalizing every presentation.

*—Mr. Weissman is the founder of Power Presentations Ltd. His new book is "Presentations in Action," from which this is adapted.*