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Secrets of Successful Presenta

*Industry Pros Reveal How to
Make the Best Impression.*

by Kelle L. Larkin

A fantastic presentation doesn't just happen. For all but a few gifted souls, it's a painstakingly mapped out, repeatedly rehearsed performance on which a considerable financial reward hinges.

Talk about pressure! Anyone can point and click through 15 slides and read bulleted text aloud to an audience. But as a rule, that's not the path to commercial real estate profits.

A crackerjack presentation can be the portal to myriad lucrative prospects. It is an opportunity to secure new listings, a way to acquaint a buyer with a seller, and a chance to illustrate why a particular site is perfect for a client's business. It is the springboard to earning consulting work with preferred clients, influencing zoning boards, or putting together the pieces of large, complicated deals.

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Despite the fact that most presentations follow a similar format, each one is a unique opportunity to package information to meet an audience's needs. To do that, presenters must know their audience, know their information, and — equally important — know themselves. That, in a nutshell, is the framework for a winning presentation.

Too Much Technology?

Before beginning a presentation, commercial real estate professionals first must choose the delivery method. For a number of years, there's been no question: The word *presentation* practically has been synonymous with PowerPoint. But overuse of computer presentations has sent some presenters back to the flip charts, while others forge ahead into new technological realms.

CD-ROM technology is at the heart of the cutting-edge applications that Bill Gladstone, CCIM, SIOR, a sales associate with NAI/Commercial-Industrial Realty Co. in Camp Hill, Pa., uses in his presentations.

Gladstone calls PowerPoint presentations archaic. Since late 2000, his company has been using what he considers the new paradigm of the sales presentation world — a blend of Micromedia Flash and CD-ROM technology. His on-staff information technology specialist writes interactive presentations for him to use with his laptop computer and a television set.

"I sit across the table from the person I'm presenting to with the television set behind me. The computer is on my lap so I can control what flashes on the TV screen without losing eye contact with my audience," he says.

Special effects choreographed to music and video-like streaming generates conversation better than any slide show, he says. "People love it because it's different."

Injecting high-tech vibrancy into an old song and dance is Gladstone's secret to snagging clients. "I like to stay on the cutting edge. I used to get listings simply because I knew how to create a Web site," he says, recalling his presentations during the Internet's youth. "People were impressed that I had that knowledge; that's how I learned that technology really sells. I try to stay a step ahead of the pack with really impressive presentations."

Also in tune with new technology is Adam Von Romer, CCIM, an investment associate at Marcus & Millichap in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. For the past couple of years, he has seen a steep increase in sales transactions that originate with CD-ROMs received in the mail in lieu of a sales letter, cold call, or initial presentation. Von Romer says that CD-ROMs enable users to tour properties from their desks or read a financial analysis without attending a presentation. "They're completely interactive; I'm more predisposed to consider them than I am to read a sales letter," he says.

Overuse of technology, however, can lead to a presenter's downfall.

"I stopped being so enamored with slide presentations the day a client said to me, 'If I see one more PowerPoint [presentation], I'm going to vomit,'" says

Jerry Anderson, CCIM, president of Coldwell Banker Commercial in Parsippany, N.J. "Needless to say, my laptop didn't get switched on that day."

Luckily, Anderson had plan B tucked into his briefcase in case of mechanical failure — a printout of his presentation, which he ended up using as a flip chart.

He has been doing so ever since.

"Leave your laptop at the office," he advises. For those who can't fathom working without a technological crutch, he recommends using visuals sparingly to avoid a completely linear presentation. "You are the star of the show; your slide shows and flip charts are only bit players."

Anne Warfield, speaking coach and owner of Impression Management Professionals in Minneapolis, agrees that technology should fall into the background of successful presentations. "It's not about the visuals," she says. A certain amount of unstructured flexibility must be present to keep spontaneity alive. "If you have to flip through 10 PowerPoint slides just to get to where your customer needs to be, you look incompetent," she says.

Although Von Romer is a staunch PowerPoint advocate, he agrees that "If your audience is so riveted by the technology you use to deliver your material, they'll miss the message entirely. If that happens, you're toast. You've completely wasted your time."

Know Thy Audience

Instead of trying to impress clients with high-tech bells and whistles, most practitioners agree that the engineering of profitable presentations begins with small talk and a simple handshake. Yet even the most experienced commercial real estate professionals often drop the ball when it comes to the human touch, Anderson says, even though building rapport is remarkably easy, particularly in one-on-one situations.

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Walk into the client's office and scan the room for visual clues to spark an intimate connection with that person, Anderson advises. Diplomas, collectibles, and family photos reveal a plethora of possibilities from which to establish a link.

Von Romer agrees. "Find something to use to initiate a personal conversation that shows the person you care about something other than just their business."

Donnie McKinney, CCIM, inadvertently discovered that sometimes the quality of client rapport is more significant than the content of the show.

"I stayed up until 3 a.m. preparing my PowerPoint for a listing presentation at a university," says McKinney, owner of Coldwell Banker Commercial Marshall Realty in Paducah, Ky. "I thought I was dealing with university types and I wanted to impress them — turned out they were regular people."

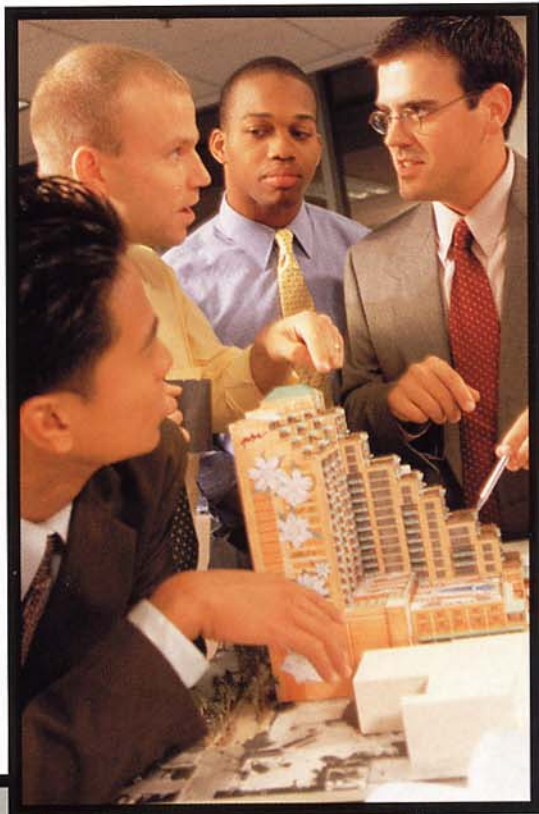
He had investigated the market where the property was located to learn recent prices paid for retail properties and familiarize himself with the area's prospects. But McKinney spent the majority of his presentation time cultivating a bond with the foundation director, discussing common interests — their children and the college, which, coincidentally, is McKinney's alma mater.

"I established trust without ever turning my laptop on," he says. Instead, he impulsively chose to focus verbally on what he calls the secret to selling. "First, I find out what the person already wants, and then I just tell them how I'll give it to them," McKinney says. He uses that to uncover the parameters necessary to clinch the deal.

"This man wanted as little involvement as possible. He wanted me to list the property, market it, and make as much money as possible for both of us. I just told him how I could accomplish that," McKinney says. The result? He landed a \$10 million listing without ever removing his slides from his briefcase.

"It was a beautiful presentation. I told them I had this really fancy dog-and-pony show all ready to go," he says. "But they didn't even want to see it. I had the job, so there was no point overselling."

As McKinney's story illustrates, flexibility is key to staying in tune with an



audience. Ralph Spencer, CCIM, SIOR, GRI, of Innovative Learning LLC agrees. The corporate trainer and consultant in Orlando, Fla., says nothing is worse than wasting precious time droning on about your credentials — designations, awards, reputation — when the audience wants to discuss the mechanics of the deal. “Sometimes you have to convince them that they have the right company and sometimes they’re already comfortable with you. Then you have to focus on telling them how you’ll solve their problem.” It’s an entirely situational decision that often cannot be made until presenters are in the thick of it, he says.

Warfield says that too many salespeople prepare a presentation thinking, “What kind of information do I need to get across to these people?”

“That’s the wrong approach,” she says, warning against the automatic spewing of data to which many novice practitioners might resort. Presentations delivered by the masters clearly are tailored around the needs of the target audience, she says.

“Ask yourself some questions about this customer in advance. Write down everything you know about them beforehand,” she advises. “Whom will you be speaking to? Where is this customer at and where do they want to be? What’s on their plate? What issues and concerns do they have? How can you get them there? Read your audience, look for a course of action, and adjust your presentation on the spot if you need to.”

Getting the client immediately involved is a valuable strategy. “The sooner he speaks and you listen, the more likely you are to be successful in your efforts to persuade him into a decision,” Spencer says. He advocates leveraging interactive dialog, calling presentations that don’t involve the audience “canned.”

“People get tired of listening passively and not being able to speak; that format bores listeners,” Spencer says. “Get them talking right away; ask at the beginning of the meeting what information is most crucial to the listener. Come out and ask, ‘What’s the most

important thing we need to cover today?’ Ask, be prepared for anything, and give the client permission to speak freely throughout the meeting.”

The key to this type of flexibility is being very familiar with the audience, says Gregg Wolin, CCIM, chief operating officer of Inca Capital, in Scottsdale, Ariz. “You have to know their sophistication level. Regardless of what else you do, if your presentation is too complex for them to understand, they’ll be too embarrassed to ask questions; they’ll just say no.”

Reading Body Language

“When you present to a group, be just as aware of what your body is saying as you are of the words coming out of your mouth,” advises Anne Warfield, speaking coach and owner of Impression Management Professionals in Minneapolis. “If the two are not congruent, people will believe what they read in your body language instead of your words.” She offers the following pointers on how body language influence audiences.

- Tilt your head to one side while listening. “This shows you are truly attentive to your customers’ needs and you are trying to absorb everything they are saying.”
 - Make individual eye contact. “Do not scan the room with your eyes — it comes off as insincere and nervous.”
 - Keep your head up. “If you keep your head down, you’ll be interpreted as judgmental and condescending.”
 - Use open hand movements. “Open palms are perceived as honest.” Hands can be used moderately to emphasize points.
- “Once you are able to read body language, you can adjust your presentation on the spot since you can read what your

the more trustworthy you become in the eyes of your audience,” Warfield says.

Handouts help to reaffirm a presenter’s depth of knowledge. Since take-home material increases retention by more than 25 percent, handouts always should be utilized, says Frank Candy, a speech coach with the American Speakers Bureau in Orlando. Wolin agrees but stresses that materials should be distributed after the presentation. “Handouts during the presentation are distracting. If you give them out beforehand, everyone is looking down during

customer is thinking,” Warfield says. She offers the following tips for reading an audience’s movements.

- Clenched hands: Indicates people disagree with something you say but are not comfortable voicing it. The higher the clenched hands are raised, the more frustrated they are.
- Picking off imaginary lint: “This can have one of two meanings: They are bored and they are dismissing you or they disagree with you but feel constrained in offering their own opinion.”
- People resting cheeks on hands: They are evaluating what you say and are interested. “If their thumb is under their chin, then they still have some doubts that you have not sold them on yet.”
- People sitting with crossed arms and legs: “You’ve heard a million times that this posture means a person is shut off to you. The reality is that we all like to sit this way because it is comfortable. Keep in mind, though, that in a study by Gerald Nierenberg of more 2,000 negotiations, not one closed until the other party was moved out of the crossed arm and leg position.”

Know Thy Stuff

Although knowing the audience sets the tone and style of a presentation, knowledge of the subject is the bricks and mortar. Illustrating knowledge builds the admiration and trust that are essential to closing the deal.

“The more knowledgeable you appear on the subject you’re speaking [about],

your talk, studying the handout, and they lose concentration,” he says.

Spencer uses what he calls the grab-bag presentation method for handouts and other visuals to aid spontaneity. “Keep a briefcase under the table and reach in whenever you need to for a map, chart, or a market analysis. You may not need all the elements you bring — some of the

talk should be loosely structured — but have everything just in case.”

Know Thy Self

Being aware of one’s own strengths and weaknesses helps any speaker, and presenters may want to confront company negatives upfront.

Go in prepared to use shortcomings as strengths, Warfield says. “Take any perceived weakness that you or your firm might have and flip it into a positive — right upfront, before it can be addressed by the other party. If larger development companies are going after their business too, give all the advantages to working with your small firm instead,” she says.

The way to overcome personal negatives, such as stage fright and stammering, is the same way to get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice. “There is absolutely no second chance to make a first impression,” Wolin says. “Rehearse.”

Practice is the key to a transparent performance, particularly for those who find public speaking difficult, he says. “If you’re talking to more than a handful of people, you’d better be well rehearsed unless you’re a particularly talented speaker,” Wolin says. “Your one-liners, your hand gestures — everything has to be perfected.”

He speaks from experience, referring to an acquisition analysis lecture he delivered to a large group some years back. “I had done it the

previous year and had been really well prepared. It went great. The second year, even though the topic was slightly different, I thought I could just wing it. I bombed because I wasn’t prepared enough.”

Practicing at a mirror or videotaping rehearsals are good ways to identify annoying idiosyncrasies, such as too many “ahs” or “ums.” To drop the habit cold turkey, “Bring someone along to the talk to sit in the back of the room and make a list of each time you commit the offense,” Warfield says. Just knowing that someone is keeping score dramatically will reduce or completely eradicate the problem, she says.

Another way to unconsciously detract from a stellar presentation is to overdress. Leave the power tie or brightly hued silk scarf in the closet. That old rule of dressing a notch above your audience still is good advice, Von Romer says, but your outfit should not be memorable. “Monochromatic color schemes will keep the attention focused on your message and off your clothing,” he says.

Timing is another personal issue to consider. Spencer’s most fatal presentation mistake was not confirming the time allotted for the presentation in advance and planning accordingly. “Here I was pacing myself for an hour. Little did I know that the president of the corporation had 20 minutes to listen to me before catching a flight. He left his senior officers at the meeting, but he was the key decision maker and I hadn’t reached my point by the time he left. I didn’t get the deal.”

The soured presentation taught the industry veteran a bittersweet lesson: Less is more. No presentation should exceed an hour in length, he says, including warm-up and questions. “Talk for only 30 to 45 minutes. America’s businesspeople have an hour window now — tops. That’s just the way it is. Go for the salient points and don’t cloud them by smothering prospects with too much information. If you go over an hour, you’re in trouble unless they are doing the talking,” Spencer says.

Although the complexity of a subject often is the measuring stick for the length of a presentation, Wolin also notes that conciseness is crucial. A presentation should be “no less than 20 minutes, though,” he says. “If it’s too long, you put



your audience to sleep, but if it's too short, you'll sound like a flake."

Humor is another last-minute judgment call. For those personally comfortable with humor, if it fits the occasion, and if the joke absolutely can't be perceived as offensive, then do it, Warfield says. But be aware of the audience's current mood. "Go with the mood of the group," she suggests. "You don't want to appear flippant [and] using humor inappropriately can make you seem that way." On the other side of the coin, she adds that if a group is very loose and presenters are too serious, they run the risk of appearing stiff.

Advice on what *not* to do includes two caveats. First, inadequate preparation facilitates failure and makes even the best speakers appear inept. "If you have to say, 'I'll get that information to you in the mail,' then you weren't prepared," Anderson says.

And second, "Talk when you should be listening and you'll set yourself up to fail," Candy says. "You have two ears and one mouth. Use them in the same proportion."

Closing the Deal

Like all other parts of a presentation, the close should be uniquely customized around the audience. "Some people need to be led all the way through the close," Candy says. "Other people are very detail oriented and need to know all the t's are crossed and the i's are dotted before they will close a deal. Each situation is different. In our world today you can't boil it down to six closing lines and three ways to lock it in," he says.

Anderson says he is shocked when veteran salespeople work hard to build their cases and then either fail to close at all or wrap it up with a comment like, "So, what do you think?"

"That's no close at all," he says. No matter what the subject, a presentation should end with a summary of the value the presenter will bring to the transaction and a call to action. "Close by saying, 'I really want to go to work for you,'" he advises.

To build up to a fabulous finish, Candy reminds that confidence, preparation, and great listening skills are the hallmarks of polished presentations. "Speak from the heart and tell the truth," he says. "It will please some and astonish the rest." ♦

For more information or help on successful presentations in commercial real estate contact:



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