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## **Selling Your Way to Success: How to Present Your Proposal at an Executive Meeting**

By Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

What's the worst reaction you've ever gotten when you made an important presentation? Probably, it would come in second to the one I just heard about. A woman—ironically she was interviewing me for an article about "Knockout Presentations"—told me the story of her disaster. It was early in her career as a policy analyst. She was just out of school, proud of her MBA and working in her first real job. When her supervisor praised a report she'd done, she was thrilled. She was less thrilled when her "reward" turned out to be presenting the same report to their executive team.

She spent a tense week getting ready, making sure she knew exactly what to say. She spent hours writing out her presentation and prepared every conceivable statistic to back up her points. It never occurred to her however, that *how* she presented was as important as *what* she presented.

When her turn came to deliver her report, things quickly went downhill. Naturally, she was nervous. A lot depended on the next few minutes. She stumbled through 200 slides, forgot her lines, and got more and more flustered. Bored executives weren't sure what her point was and started glancing at their watches, which made it even worse. Desperate, she wanted to flee—and her audience probably did too! When she concluded, they didn't ask a single question. That would have extended the already painful event.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? If not, great! And let's make sure it never does. Especially if a lot depends on how well you do. You probably know that the higher up the corporate ladder you go, the more important your communication skills become. And the faster you develop and hone your skills, the faster you'll climb.

Perhaps you're already speaking up in team meetings and getting your ideas across effectively. If so, how do you feel about facing a room full of senior management, or at least 5 around a board room table, all staring at you? What is different? Well, for one thing the stakes are higher. All business communications are important, but, with senior management as your audience, you are in the hot seat. They are going to accept or reject the recommendations that you, your department, or your team have worked so hard on. Weeks, months, maybe even years of work depend on your few minutes. Who wouldn't be nervous?

Don't worry. You are human. This is a perfectly natural way to feel. Remember, they can't see how you feel, only how you look and act. You want them to focus on and consider your proposals, not your anxiety. And you'll look cool and collected when you follow these Frippicisms for dealing with senior management.



### Seven Fripp Do's

**1. Practice.** A report to senior managers is not a conversation; however, it must sound conversational. Once you have your notes, practice by speaking out loud to an associate, or when you are driving to work, or on the treadmill. Make sure you are familiar with what you intend to say. It is not about being perfect. It is about being personable. (Remember, rehearsal is the work; performance is the relaxation.)

**2. Open with your conclusions.** Don't make your senior level audience wait to find out why you are there.

**3. Describe the benefits** if your recommendation is adopted. Make these benefits seem vivid and obtainable.

**4. Describe the costs**, but frame them in a positive manner. If possible, show how not following your recommendation will cost even more...

**5. List your specific recommendations**, and keep it on target. Wandering generalities will lose their interest. You must focus on the bottom line. Report on the deals, not the details.

**6. Look everyone in the eye** when you talk. You will be more persuasive and believable. (You can't do this if you are reading!)

**7. Be brief.** The fewer words you can use to get your message across, the better. Jerry Seinfeld says, "I spend an hour taking an eight-word sentence and making it five." That's because he knew it would be funnier. In your case, shorter is more memorable and repeatable.

### Three Fripp Don'ts

**1. Don't try to memorize** the whole presentation. Memorize your opening, key points and conclusion. Practice enough so you can "forget it." This helps retain your spontaneity.

**2. Never, never read your lines**—not from a script and not from PowerPoint slides. Your audience will go to sleep.

**3. Don't wave or hop.** Don't let nervousness (or enthusiasm) make you too animated—but don't freeze. Don't distract from your own message with unnecessary movement.



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## Where to Start

1. **What is the topic** or subject you are reporting on? Be clear with yourself so you can be clear with your audience.
2. **Why is your topic important** enough to be on the busy agenda of senior level managers?
3. **What questions** will your audience be asking? Can you answer them early in your presentation?

## Here's an Example

**Present your conclusion:** What is your central theme, objective, or the big idea of your report? How can you introduce it in one sentence? Suppose that you've been in charge of a high-level, cross-functional team to study whether there is a need for diversity training in your company. You might start by saying, "Our committee has spent three months studying diversity training programs and whether one could benefit our company. Our conclusion is that diversity training would be an exceptionally good investment. We would save money, increase employee retention, and improve company morale."

**Present your recommendations:** "We recommend that the company initiate a pilot program, starting next quarter, using the ABC Training Company at an investment of \$.... The ABC Company has successfully implemented this program with one of our subsidiaries, as well as many Fortune 100 companies. All 27 members of the cross-functional team agreed with this conclusion. Our team was made up of a real cross-section of the company—two Vice Presidents, the Facilities Secretary, eighteen associates, some with PhDs, and six entry-level personnel. The group includes both long-term employees and some new hires. And all 27 members of the team are willing to be part of the evaluation committee to study the results before a decision is made about a complete company rollout."

**Describe what's in it for them;** Address the needs of senior management, as well as the company. Answer the questions they will be asking, and show them how your recommendation can make them look good. For example, senior management is usually charged with increasing sales and reducing costs. What if this program means saving money by lowering employee turnover, yet has a relatively modest cost?

"Why is this a good idea, just when we are cutting unnecessary spending? One of our company's key initiatives is to recruit and retain 20% more of the best available talent than we did in the last fiscal year. If this training had been in place last year, not only would morale have been higher, but our 23% minority associates would have rated their employee satisfaction survey higher. As you remember, for the last three years our minority associates traditionally rate their satisfaction 3% lower than the other population. This training could have helped increase satisfaction and retention. We would lower the cost of recruiting and training new associates.

"How does this investment compare to other investments we have already made? As a comparison, the initial cost of the pilot for all three offices is 2% of what we spend on maintenance agreements for our copier machines in our headquarters building."

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**Conclusion:** "On behalf of the 27-member committee, thank you for this opportunity. The friendships we have formed and our increased company knowledge is invaluable to us all. The entire team is committed to this project. We are asking for your okay to start the pilot program."

You'll make a strong impression and increase your chances of acceptance when you can be short, clear, and concise. Be prepared and practiced. It's okay to be nervous, but nobody sees how you feel, just how you look and act.

(1350 words)

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