

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The Purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Social Sciences Team

Delivering Effective Presentations

Being capable of delivering effective presentations is important for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) providers at all levels. The United States Department of Agriculture Strategic Plan currently identifies NRCS' first goal as follows:

“Individuals and their neighbors working together as effective and willing stewards of the natural resources on their property and in their communities.” Objectives within that goal call for “a strong and effective conservation partnership...” and “a diverse and well-served customer base...” Our ability to competently present Agency goals and objectives, programs, products and services to a wide variety of groups in the community is crucial in meeting these goals.

Effective presentations can create a desire within your audience for more information. A presenter should have the ability to visually, mentally, and verbally reach all groups, no matter how similar or different the groups' characteristics may be. Preparing and delivering effective presentations requires knowing the background of your audience, their existing needs and knowledge about the topic or subject matter, how the information is to be used and how cultures affect communications. In addition to considering

the characteristics of your audience, new technologies are described that make reaching many audiences easier and more efficient. Specifically included are tips for using PowerPoint presentations and other visual methods.



Getting Started

Part of getting started is to conduct an audience analysis. This entails knowing who your audience will be before preparing your presentation, determining the results you want to achieve, and potential benefits for the audience. Presentations should differ based on the group's characteristics. For example, you would probably not make the same presentation to an audience of potential clients as you would to a group of producers who have been USDA clients for many years. Consider the following steps when developing your presentation:

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Do an audience analysis. An audience analysis should consist of looking at the background, interests, needs, cultures, literacy, and life-styles of the audience. With this information you can tailor a presentation about an issue to the needs and interests of a specific audience.

Achieve results with your presentation. Set goals. Decide what key messages you want to convey and/or actions you want the audience to take. This will help you structure the main points in your presentation and build them to fit your goals.

Determine “what is in it for them?” If the audience believes there are benefits for them or that your presentation will impact them, they will listen intently to what you have to say. Adapting a presentation to the listeners works to the benefit of the presenter.

How Culture Effects Communications

Culture is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, beliefs, values, religion, and behavioral norms in a population and/or a group. Part of culture is dynamic and changes continuously (e.g., application of technology in modern cultures), while other cultural aspects are much more stable (e.g., religious beliefs and family structure). Culture is passed down through each generation. It may, or may not, be correlated to race. For example, a person who has a Japanese parent and lives in Hawaii may consider himself or herself a Pacific Islander. Cultures differ from each other because of values, beliefs, and views of the world as well as behavioral norms and thought processes. Consider the following

to help meet the needs of diverse audiences: **Barriers to overcome while speaking to an audience.** If you understand an audience’s culture, you can make a connection between yourself and the audience that may not be there if you assume their culture is the exact same as yours. When presenters do not understand their audience, they can actually create an uncomfortable situation that prevents future positive communication if barriers are not evaluated and overcome.

An attempt should be made to overcome the language barriers in advance. Remember, words and expressions can mean contradictory things in different cultures. Most cultures forgive a person who is trying to respect cultural norms, but may make unknown blunders. However, they tend not to overlook or forgive a person who displays an arrogant attitude and who fails to make an effort to address cultural differences. One example of cultural differences is reflected in the expression “I’ll be back soon.” This could mean 10 minutes to you, several hours to someone else, or even the next day to another person.

Do not make assumptions. This is when we assume that another person perceives, judges, thinks, and reasons the same way we do. When working with other cultures do not assume motives of the audience without understanding their cultural reasons. For example, if a person were to leave the room during your presentation, do not automatically assume the person is being rude. Various cultures would interpret that behavior in different ways. One culture may believe it is only necessary to leave a presentation for an emergency. In another, it might be acceptable for a person to leave because of a restroom call or boredom. Whatever the reason may be, do not assume your own explanation is the correct one.

Guidance for communicating with different cultures. By using only your personal cultural norms, you may fail to communicate well with others. There are plenty of books about cultural norms among population groups in the U.S. Each American cultural group has a unique history with respect to arriving in America and establishing themselves. It is important that you learn as much as possible about a cultural group in your district so you can work with them in a respectful and effective manner. Here are some communication tips:

- Show respect for the person and their culture.
- Tolerate ambiguity.
- Try not to show discomfort in situations that may be normal for the particular cultural group.
- Relate to people.

- Be nonjudgmental.
- Ask for clarification when you do not understand.
- Personalize your observations.
Example, “This is my way, what is your way?”
- Display empathy.
- Be persistent and patient.
- Be willing to listen, learn, and compromise.

Be aware of and sensitive to the fact that our services may not be wanted - NRCS staff could be perceived as intruders, feared, or resented.

Developing the Presentation

Many factors contribute to developing an effective presentation. Focus on a few topic areas, provide current information in simple non-government language, and be well organized. Paying attention to these factors will contribute to your success as a presenter.

The body of your presentation should have no more than four main topic areas. Too many areas of focus can confuse an audience and make them lose interest.

Make sure the information is current. Note the sources of your information to enhance credibility. If the information is over 5 years old, your credibility, in some instances, may be hindered. You want the audience to know that the content of your presentation is current in today’s world.

Avoid using government phrases or abbreviations. You cannot assume that people in the audience are familiar with the terms commonly used by government agencies. For example, if you were talking about the CRP program, you would want to use the full program name, Conservation Reserve Program, the first time you mention it. There after, you can use the abbreviation as long as you have explained it.

Organizing Your Material. Of the many presentation outlines you can use to organize your material, only two are presented here. The first outline can be used when giving a presentation about a problem. This presentation outline consists of six parts:

1. Background or history of the problem
2. Current condition of the problem
3. Possible solutions
4. Analysis of the solutions
5. Recommended solution
6. Call for action.

A second outline consists of only three parts:

1. Description of what has been done in the past
2. Present status
3. What will or could happen in the future.

For example, if there is new legislation or farm policy, you might want to start with describing how the need, or situation, was identified. Then explain how it was dealt with in the past, and how that need is being met, or not met, today. The third part of the presentation would talk about how the new legislation or policy will affect the audience in the future.



Preparing for the Presentation

“Failure to prepare is preparing to fail.”

John Wooden, retired UCLA basketball coach Double-checking the details in advance of a presentation is important to your success. The following tips will contribute toward a successful meeting:

Enhancing Your Image

Looking presentable enhances the image and credibility of not only yourself, but also whom you represent. Here are some image enhancing tips:

- Dress appropriately for the audience, occasion, and setting.
- Present yourself well groomed (appearance, hygiene, and clothing).
- No flashy accessories. The audience should focus on you not your jewelry.

Details, details, details. Confirm the date, time, and anticipated number of attendees. Determine who will be your primary target audience? Will the presentation be held in a person's home, restaurant, hotel, USDA Service Center, university, school, or some other location? Know how much time has been allocated for your presentation. When these details are known, determine how they will impact your remarks.

Arrange for seating, equipment, and other needs in advance. Let the meeting planner know up to several months in advance, if possible, exactly what type of room set-up you prefer. Make sure the equipment you are taking to the presentation works properly. If your materials are shipped to you, make sure you know when they are scheduled to arrive, preferably before you leave the office. Then, if there is a delivery problem you can hand-carry the materials with you if necessary. Consider taking extra accessories, like an extension cord and projector bulb, in case you need them.

Arrive early. Check out the room where you will be making your presentation. Try to arrange the seating to meet your needs and those of the attendees if the room has not been set up the way you requested in advance. Check the equipment, including microphones, to make sure it is in working order before the presentation. If feasible, have all the equipment set up and have the projector focused and ready to use before you begin. If someone else is handling the equipment for you, review your needs with him or her. Have handouts distributed, or ready, for disbursement before the audience arrives.

Lighting should be adjusted. Find all the light switches in advance. When visual equipment is used, make sure a light is on the presenter. You want to keep all the house lights up except those aimed at the screen. The visuals should not overpower the presentation, but add to it. When using PowerPoint, or any equipment that requires the lights to be dimmed for better viewing, stand to the side of the visual.

Dealing with stage fright. Rehearsing aloud and being well prepared are the best ways to reduce fear on stage.

In addition, consider reviewing your presentation goals with a colleague or rehearsing your material in front of another person. By being well prepared, you can become so familiar with the material that any question can be handled without hesitation.

Opening Remarks

The opening 7 seconds of your presentation are critical. Getting and keeping the audience's attention during this time is important. The presenter needs to grab the attention of the audience and give a brief summary of the presentation quickly. Generally, a 30-minute presentation should have a 1 to 3 minute opening.

Different ways to achieve audience attention.

Openings should be done in good taste and not be offensive to any of the audience. The three tests of an opener to decide if it is effective are:

- Does it break the preoccupation of the audience?
- Does it facilitate networking among the listeners?
- Is it relevant to the rest of the presentation?

One could tell a story, pay a compliment to the audience, use a quote or unusual statistic, pose a question, use humor, or possibly make a significant or outrageous statement. Openings should be sensitive to the culture of your audience and establish your credibility.

Define your image at the beginning of your presentation. Begin your presentation the way you want the audience to think about you and your agency. The image you establish at the beginning is the image that usually sticks throughout your remarks.

While On the Podium

How you verbally and non-verbally communicate to the audience can impact their impression of you, your agency, and your message. Suggestions while on the podium include:



Do not read your presentation. Become so familiar with your topic that an outline is all the guide (or prompt) you need. If you can communicate with your audience instead of reading a speech, your credibility is increased. In addition, your anxiety of presenting in front of an audience is lowered.

Eye contact. You generally want to engage the audience in an enlarged conversation with ongoing eye contact. If so, pretend you are having a conversation with someone and perform the same gestures and eye contact you would with one person during an everyday conversation. About every 4 to 5 seconds, switch the person you are directing your attention to by changing eye contact. Scanning the group lowers your credibility with the audience.

Not all cultures respond to eye contact the same way. A presenter should move eye contact to different areas of the room, using extended eye contact with people in different areas.

Remember to smile. Avoid looking serious, uptight, or annoyed. People reflect the attitude of their leaders, and while speaking, you are the leader. When you smile and look confident in what you are doing, people will smile back and assume things are going well.

Vary volume and voice patterns. Use high and low voice pitches to enhance words that begin an important section. Speeding up and slowing down can also emphasize the importance of a word, phrase, or sentence.

Avoid distractions. While delivering your presentation, keep in mind that the audience is watching and listening to you. You should feel comfortable enough with your presentation through practice that you know what to do with your hands, feet, and arms. Never fidget while on the podium, (i.e., playing with change in a pocket or with jewelry.) This makes you appear nervous and unprepared.

Begin with your feet and arms in a comfortable position. If you need to emphasize a point, use your arms and hands to enforce what you are saying with a gesture. All hand gestures should be done at eye level with about a ninety-degree angle at your elbow. Your legs should be shoulder-length apart, with one foot slightly forward, and knees flexible.

If you feel uncomfortable, move around. An audience likes someone who can appear comfortable and interactive with the audience. Take a few paces in one direction. Change your position in about 5 minutes. This also helps to release tension. Avoid over-using this method; however, once in a while it is a welcome change for you and your audience.

Eleven Ways to Motivate Adults During Your Presentation

“Motivation is that within a person that incites that person to action”

Robert W. Pike, Putting Power, Punch, and Pizzazz Into Your Presentation

Here are eleven ideas to motivate adults during a presentation:

1. Create a need within the audience
2. Give praise, encouragement, and approval
3. Develop and sustain interest
4. See the value of personal motives
5. Share existing long-range objectives or suggest new ones
6. Give them a choice
7. Get excited yourself
8. Relate experiences that apply to life
9. Strengthen inter-personal relationships
10. Develop a sense of personal responsibility
11. Encourage wholesome competition

Wrapping It Up

An effective closing needs to tie all aspects of the presentation together. For a 30-minute presentation the closing should be approximately 1 to 3 minutes. It should allow for celebration, if appropriate. The audience should want to take some type of action with the new information presented.

An effective closing can be achieved in many ways. Summarize the points made earlier in the presentation. Ask or suggest the audience take some type of action. Provide the means for them to take action. Finish with a story mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, or make a statement that brings all the thoughts together. Other aspects of a successful closing are:

End the presentation on schedule. Audiences tend to get annoyed and/or angry with presenters who run over the allotted time. Sticking to the time scheduled for your presentation makes you appear more organized and familiar with the information you are presenting.

In addition, the meeting planners and other presenters will appreciate your respect for everyone's time.

Respect distances. After your presentation, attendees may approach you with questions or comments. Remember each culture has their own talking distance that is commonly used between two people. Talking too close or too far away can be offensive. The Arab culture has the closest talking distance, which is about 15 inches. Europeans have a talking distance of about 20 inches, Americans are typically comfortable between 25 and 30 inches, and the standard for Asian populations is normally between 35 to 40 inches. Do not always assume you need to designate the talking distance. Allow the other person to determine the distance when you are unsure of his or her comfortable talking distance. Plant yourself and let the other person position him or herself comfortably to you.

Ending a presentation with, "Are there any questions?" is awkward if there are not any questions. If appropriate, you may want to end with a suggestion,

"There may be some questions." Wait to see if any questions are posed and handle them appropriately.

Using Visual Aids

PowerPoint software, flip charts, handouts, and slides are some of the visual aids used in presentations. Depending upon the aid, a variety of design factors can improve your effectiveness.

Using PowerPoint for Your Presentation

A presentation using PowerPoint software, rather than overheads and flip charts, is a leading method to outline a presentation. Tips for developing a PowerPoint presentation follow.

Slide Backgrounds

- Background should be consistent throughout the presentation.
- To bring attention to one slide in a presentation, use a different background.
- Use one type of transition from slide to slide throughout your presentation.

Fonts & Text

- Choose a plain font and use it throughout the presentation.
- One slide should only contain up to three separate thoughts.
- Use a maximum of four to six lines of text per slide.
- Font sizes should be large enough to see from the back row.
- Use upper and lowercase lettering for easier readability.
- Do not use fonts smaller than 24.
- Less is better.
- Text should be a summary of points, not entire sentences.
- Apply the KISS principle – **Keep It Short and Sweet**.
- Keep to two-or-three colors, except for coloring in graphics.
- Avoid using too many graphs and charts particularly if the people in the back of the room cannot see them as well as those in the front of the room.

Organization of Information

- Bullets not numbers should separate ideas.
- Use title slides for new ideas. They help to establish reference points.
- The title should be kept in a general location.
- Sound clips and clip-art should only add to the content. Clip-art, sound, fonts, colors, backgrounds, and transitions can be distracting and can misdirect the attention of the audience from the intended content. They should be used to focus attention.
- Avoid using sentences on slides. Slides should serve only as an outline - for discussion.
- If possible, do a dry run of your presentation at the location before the audience arrives.
- Use a new visual no more frequently than every 35 to 45 seconds.
- Avoid vertical lettering.

Handouts

- If you want the audience to have presentation notes, print out a copy of your slides. It will allow them to focus more attention on the speaker than taking notes.
- Condense three slides to one page, which allows space for notes.
- Make sure information and handouts are current.
- Using color with handouts has impact.
- Color raises comprehension up to 73%
- Learning retention and recall is raised by 55% to 78%
- Sells products and ideas more effectively by 50% to 85%
- Willingness to read increases up to 80%

Overheads

If a PowerPoint projector is not available at the location where you are making the presentation, the tips noted for Power Point presentations can also be used for creating overheads.



Using flip charts and other non-projected visuals

Flip charts, pictures, models, and props are useful where the group is less than 25 people. These non-projected visuals should not be used in larger groups. Here are general tips on how to use visuals:

- Make sure the chart is readable to all attendees.
- Letters should be at least 1½ inch high.
- Leave 2 inches between lines.
- Use as few words as possible.
- Center your image, leaving the bottom one-third of the flip chart blank so people sitting in the back can read it.
- Brighten the chart's visual appeal.
- Underline the key words.
- Use color, graphic designs, and geometric shapes.
- If you cannot draw, consider cutting out descriptive pictures from magazines.
- Use flip chart pages to record information
- During a brainstorming session, quickly write key words that reflect contributors' ideas.
- Use different colored marker pens and two charts - one for your pre-written agenda and the other for contributors' comments, questions and ideas.
- Score pages before the meeting so they tear off easily.
- Pencil in notes to yourself that the audience cannot see.
- Flag specific chart pages for easier access during the presentation.

Resources

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