

Presenting – How to visually influence an audience

When we talk about visual influence we mean the impact of body language, facial expressions, working with speaker support, moving about the presentation area - any of our physical actions that an audience will observe as we present to them. Do all those things influence perception and the interpretation of meaning? Yes they do and more than we would probably ever realise.

How much of an impact do they have? Different findings by psychologists and communication experts agree that visual stimuli will actively influence as much as 50% of the interpretation of a presented message. Why is visual stimulation so powerful? It is to do with how our minds process information. Every piece of information that we ever received is stored. Most of it we do not remember or consciously use, but we do use it unconsciously. As we receive new information we reference it against that “old” information to find meaning. The interesting discovery was that the mind has a subconscious channel that is much more efficient at this referencing process than the conscious channel, and is especially smart in the interpretation of sensory stimuli and the triggering of emotional reactions. What this all means is that whatever message we think we are presenting to an audience, it is our visual signals both deliberate and unintentional that the audience will consciously and unconsciously observe and interpret.

First things first, how to visually present yourself

Audience attention should ultimately be on the message, but before that they need to be happy with the messenger...you! Basically you want them to trust you and to like you. So the signals that you want to send out are credibility, competence, confidence and approachability. These good habits will send those signals:

- Relax your whole body. Imagine you are being gently suspended through your shoulders and up out of your head. Feel loose through your legs. Gently shift your weight left and right and between heel and toes.
- Feel tall. Stand upright and straight with shoulders back and chin gently lifted.
- Centre yourself and turn from the hips 45 degrees left and right.
- Keep your hands away from your mouth.
- Look separately at each and every section of the audience as you introduce your presentation. Add a nod or smile as if you are greeting them.
- Maintain eye contact and talk with groups of faces. Create the impression that you are talking separately with each group at some stage of your presentation.
- Do not vacantly stare at the walls and ceiling, it suggests you are lost or uncomfortable with your words.
- Do not pace about excessively without specific purpose. Some movement will engage with the audience, but too much is distracting and will also confuse interpretation of your message.
- When using notes at a lectern, keep them loose. Have current and next pages open for smooth transition. Avoid rustling paper into the microphone.
- Do not wave notes, it is distracting. Keep your hands empty.
- Do not look repeatedly at your speaker-support screen. It distracts attention from you and suggests uncertainty, prompting the audience to read for themselves.
- Autocue is great as a prompt to a learned script. Never read an unfamiliar script. Have monitors located left, right and centre for natural audience eye contact.

- Powerpoint is great to confirm with Keywords what you have just said. Never let it cue you or enable the audience to read ahead of you. Have clear link phrases.
- “Head and shoulders” video is great for large audiences. But do not let it tie you to a lectern. Use close-ups to emphasise key messages to the audience.
- Video stings that are relevant and well made are great ways to illustrate and analogise your message. Do not use rough downloads. Remember 60 seconds is a long time. Have well rehearsed cue-in and link- back phrases.
- Finally, remember that with any technical support there must be a rehearsal so that you can pace and lead the A.V. operator.

Once you have practiced these techniques and established them as good habits you will then feel yourself presenting with the look and aura of an accomplished presenter. With that practice you will also become fully aware of just how you are visually communicating.

Next, how to visually present your message

Once you are aware and have control you can then start to visually communicate to maximum effect and give emphasis and meaning to your message. Public speaking at its best is a performing art! Public speakers who perform at the top of their art use stagecraft to show the meaning and also the emotions of their message.

Visual Emphasis

- Facial expressions can show a range of emotions: Glad, Serious, Curious, Ironic, Shocked and Confused. Practice them in a mirror and create your favourites. Act them with belief so they are noticed.
- Directed glances show how you are thinking: Look up and right when reasoning. Look up and left when recalling. Look down and aside when deliberating.
- Hand gestures confirm your actions and intentions: Counting. Hammering points. Open arms say acceptance or openness. Clasp hands say togetherness or closure.
- Movement about the stage shows how you are communicating: Centre stage or lectern says listen to me. Step to the side or forward when asking them to think about something. Walk right to the front says “this is between you and me.” Move to the far side when taking one view of an argument. Go to the opposite side when looking at the opposing view.

Subconscious Visual Emphasis

- Tapping into the visual stimulus and subconscious communication opportunity, we can use the above techniques to anchor a desired mood or audience perception. Then at a moment that you choose to, you can trigger that mood by repeating the action.
- EG: You chose one part of the stage to discuss the benefits of a clean slate approach to difficult issues. Later you return to that area when you invite the audience to question issues without direction from you but you want them to apply the same clean slate manner.
- “Stage Props” like a high stool or even a flip chart can be great anchoring tools as can light changes on the set. Additionally, stage props can act as visual metaphors. A referee’s red card indicating dismissal. A 1980’s very large mobile telephone indicating degree of progress. When visible but not explained props are great at building curiosity. They are also unforgettable images and therefore excellent at embedding messages.

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