

How to Recover from Online Presentation Blindness

August, 2006 - In 1971, UCLA Professor Albert Mehrabian concluded that human communication is 55 percent body language, 38 percent tonality and 7 percent spoken words. While those numbers are still accepted today, they beg the question: what happens during online presentations when you lose 55 percent of your communication input? “I don’t think many people realize when they start doing remote presentations that they’re at a disadvantage because they aren’t able to read body language,” points out Adelphi Kennedy, Event Services Director for Communiqué Conferencing, a company that provides audio and Web conferencing solutions to businesses worldwide. “Presenters need to understand that they’re going to be running meetings with only two forms of communication – what the other person says and how he says it.”



In an online environment, communication becomes 21 percent what you say and 79 percent how you say it, or tone – and it becomes a whole lot more difficult to “read” the prospect. But that doesn’t mean your presentation needs to suffer. It simply means you need to plan ahead for the unique environment in which you’ll be presenting. Here, says Kennedy, are some specific things you can do to overcome

the challenges of presenting virtually:

- 1. Practice reading tone of voice.* Even though you can’t see the other person, his body language will be conveyed through his voice. You just need to know how to read it, and that takes practice. If he’s enthusiastic, he’ll be sitting forward and engaged in what’s going on and that enthusiasm will be transmitted through a fast, upbeat rate of speech. If he’s skeptical or distrusting, he’ll likely cross his arms and furrow his brow – and again, those movements will be transmitted through his speech. As an online presenter, you need to become adept at reading this form of communication. Learn to pick up vocal cues and shifts in tone and adjust your presentation accordingly.
- 2. Probe into tonality changes.* Tonality consists of four elements: tempo (rate of speech), pitch (highness or lowness), inflection (the alteration of pitch or tone to emphasize a word), and resonance (intensification of a sound). When you pick up on a shift in the prospect’s tone, particularly if the tone becomes more negative or skeptical, probe immediately into the cause of that tonal shift. Saying something like, “It sounds like you might have some concerns about our capabilities” invites the prospect to voice the reasons for his change in tone.
- 3. Ask more questions.* In a face-to-face presentation, you know immediately when you’re losing your audience because they start to look around, check their watch, or flip through paperwork. But you don’t have these cues in an online presentation. Thus you need to “check in” frequently with your prospect to keep him engaged and to ensure you’re on the right track. Ask questions such as, “Does this make sense?” and “Does that sound right to you?” Doing so invites the prospect to comment on what you said, which gives you another opportunity to listen to his tone of voice. Just be careful not to overdo it.
- 4. Watch your language.* You can use your words to keep your audience with you and direct their attention in meaningful ways. Phrases such as, “Now here’s something I find very interesting...” and “This is a critical point...” directs their attention to what you are about to say so they’re ready to hear it. Again, once you’ve made that critical point, check back in with the prospect: “What do you think?”
- 5. Make it interactive.* The biggest mistake Kennedy sees online presenters make is they fail to make their meetings interactive. And if audiences aren’t involved, it’s awfully easy for them to click over to email or work on a pressing document. Find ways to hand control to your prospects. One of Kennedy’s clients, an architectural firm, lets their prospects “walk through” the firm’s buildings on its CAD software. Software sales reps should hand over control of the software as early as possible so prospects can get a feel for it. Anything you can do to make the presentation interactive goes a long way toward overcoming the lack of body language input.
- 6. Remember the fundamentals.* When presenters know their prospects aren’t going to see them, Kennedy says they tend to get lax on the basics. You still need to set your goals in advance, stick to the agenda, know who is going to be there, and be there on time. “Showing up on time for a 3:00 meeting doesn’t mean showing up at 3:00,” says Kennedy. “You need to be there at 2:45 to set up. I see people all the time opening their PowerPoint slides while the customer is waiting, or shifting from PowerPoint over to a Web site and making the customer wait while they launch the site.” Get there early, run through your checklist, and ensure everything is set up so that when the customer logs in, you’re there and you’re ready to go. Otherwise you look bad – and you’ll hear a negative tone in the prospect’s voice before you ever get started.