



The art of
strategic storytelling

What it takes to create

WINNING **PRESENTATIONS**

Why being a good presenter is
often not enough and why the
best ideas don't always win

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INTRODUCTION

THE PITCH WE HAD TO WIN

I was Head of Strategy at a London ad agency when BMW approached us to pitch; we didn't have a car client at the agency, and the CEO wanted one. Car clients look good on your credentials, and often lead to interesting and creative work. And they tend to pay well.

This was a big deal, so there was a lot of pressure.

Everyone in the company had a point of view on the pitch and the presentation. Feedback, ideas and slides came from everywhere, every day, right up to the moment we signed in at the reception desk. Even the cleaner had contributed.

The deck grew more enormous and more unwieldy as sections grew, and ideas merged and morphed. Keeping control of this beast was challenging. The laptop complained about saving such a large file. You know you are headed for trouble when there is time for a coffee while the icon spins and the hard drive whirs.

At the core of this troubled presentation was a major issue – we had lost sight of the problem we were trying to solve for the client. In fact, I'm not sure we ever fully understood this. As a result, the work was quickly becoming all about us. Not the potential client – us. How wonderfully creative we were, how smart we were (that was my – quite long – section), how much we loved cars (especially BMWs) and how fantastic our process was.

Did we mention how good we were?

With five presenters – yes, *five*, including the company CEO – and over 100 amazing slides (the creative team had excelled in design, videos and animations), we barely mentioned anything that resembled what *they* wanted, let alone getting down into what they might need from us. Acronyms flowed as we ploughed through the slides, each presenter taking longer than rehearsed as they embellished already irrelevant stories for the increasingly bored client.

It became a show about how in love we were with our slides and our ideas. It felt like, at certain moments, we might stop the presentation to slap each other on the back, revelling in how great this deck was and how well we were presenting.

As we powered on obliviously, the clients – a line of them all suited and wearing ties, sitting opposite us across the table – were not sharing our enthusiasm. They fluctuated between agitation, boredom, fear, bewilderment and, at times, outright visible confusion. You know, the face when your pet turns its head to the side as if to say, ‘I have no idea what you want from me’. That is what we were facing. But with no other choice, we continued.

How did we get from the Scissor Sisters (an early 2000s pop band) squashed in a Mini with a glitter ball to a BMW motorbike surfing off the coast of Cornwall? Honestly, I wasn’t even sure at that moment, and I wrote the damn presentation. We were so far off course after 30 minutes that as the next 60 ticked by, it started to become painful for us all. We would have been better off packing it in and going for a beer.

As we were shown out by a relieved client and into a very clinical white reception area, where our competitors were waiting, all suited up, our CEO turned and high-fived everyone on the team and yelled out, ‘F***ing way to go, team, smashed it!’ The startled receptionist reached for the security button, and our competitors were left wondering.

They had nothing to worry about.

This was the cherry on a very soggy cake. We went along with him, but we were all confused. Was he at the same pitch as us? Could he not sense the mood towards the end, that air of ‘when will this finish’?

As he closed the door to his own BMW, he turned to me and the creative director, smiled and said, 'We'll never hear from them again.' A quick squeak of the tyres and BMW was behind us.

He was right. We never received a call to 'officially' tell us we didn't win.

And we didn't need one.

EPIPHANY: PRESENTATION SKILLS ALONE ARE NOT ENOUGH

The debrief for this calamity, however, was one of my career's most productive, constructive and enlightening. We diligently went through each stage, not to find blame (if we wanted to fire those responsible, there wouldn't be anybody left in the agency) but to extract learnings, lessons and clear action points. We saw this as the best training ground for eventually winning a car client and, within a couple of months, that was the case. When Hyundai briefed us on the launch of the i30, we nailed it: not just a car client but a new car launch for an emerging brand with substantial budgets.

Although we later came out on top, the BMW presentation was a painful experience, and some 20-plus years on I can still vividly recall many details that I would rather not have burned into my memory. Losing is a painful experience, and if you are a competitive person or in any kind of sales role, you are not taking part to come second or for the participation award. Whoever said 'it's taking part that matters' wasn't in sales.

I was both frustrated and intrigued when we lost, which motivated me to try to better understand what it takes to be a great presenter. But as I learned more about the nuances of pitching strategies, ideas, solutions and content that you need others to take forward on your behalf, this became what it takes to consistently create a *winning* presentation, a change I had not predicted when I embarked on this work.

I can't tell you how many presentations I have created, curated or sat through and wished I didn't have to endure or ever see again. But it's a lot. A *lot*. With that BMW pitch near the top of the list.

After nearly 30 years of working worldwide in marketing, advertising and media strategy roles, I have seen it all. The outlandishly big ideas, the brand launches and re-launches, the new technology platforms, tender responses, campaign summaries, agency pitches and countless hundreds of media presentations covering every channel you can imagine and a few obscure ones too.

At the heart of all these presentations is a need to get an audience to buy into a strategy, idea or solution by taking them on a journey that connects what you know to what they need. This audience is seeing this content for the first time. So it needs to be delivered in such a way that they can understand it, buy into it, convince others of its benefits and, ultimately, give you the outcome you desire: approve the strategy, buy the idea or sign off on the solution. That is what it means to deliver a presentation that wins over the audience and wins the business over the competition.

The lessons from losing

I, like so many I now work with, had put a lot of effort into my presentation skills and a lot less time into thinking about the actual structure of my presentation's content beyond making it look amazing. As I studied the various presentations I was creating, reviewing and subjected to sitting through, it became evident very quickly that a lot of training is geared towards the keynote end of the market: how to deliver grandiose presentations that leave a lasting impression. But very little focus is placed on creating presentations that support the selling of ideas or strategic solutions that give the sales and strategy professionals direction on how to build something with utility for them and the audience.

These are not presentations created over several months and rehearsed to be delivered repeatedly on grand stages. No, these are presentations created in weeks, days and hours and delivered once, on big screens and small, in coffee shops and via online meetings. They are delivered once to an audience who, after seeing the presentation for the first time, have to recall the key points, find the slides they need, and then deliver your idea to the next person and possibly the next.

The critical difference between what I and many others learned as a presenter and what is needed when selling ideas is that these presentations have to connect the audience to the content so that the audience can become the presenter after just one viewing. And they have to be built to support not just you in presenting with confidence, something that you may only have just put the finishing touches to, but also what the audience needs when you leave. You need to help them review, cut down and re-share your content. This was the critical difference between what I had been focused on in developing my presenting skills and what I needed to work on to create winning presentations. From then on, everything in my approach changed. And so did my win rate.

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In one of my earlier marketing roles as a brand manager in a technology firm, I was sent on a week-long spin selling course with our sales team. At the time, I didn't see the relevance of most of what I was learning. *I'm in marketing, what has selling got to do with me?* was my slightly arrogant thought process. This training was based on the work of Neil Rackham, the author of the classic sales methodology book, *Spin Selling*.

During the week there was this one story shared by the trainers that many in the room found challenging but now makes more sense to me than it did at the time. It was the story of a very experienced and successful sales manager who was asked how he had managed to secure a multimillion-dollar sale to a major oil company. What he had worked out was that when you move from selling simple solutions that someone can buy on the spot to bigger and more complex ideas, your role changes. In the bigger sales, you only play a small part in the selling. The real selling goes on when you're not there, after you leave, after you have presented and left them with your content. It is then that the people you sold to go back and try to convince others,

and they do that with your content but without you there to present it. This sales manager stated he was certain that his success was because he spent a lot of time trying to make sure the people he talked to knew how to sell for him. He saw his role like the director of a play. He was there during rehearsals but he wasn't on stage during the performance – for that he could only watch and hope he had done enough for the message to land.

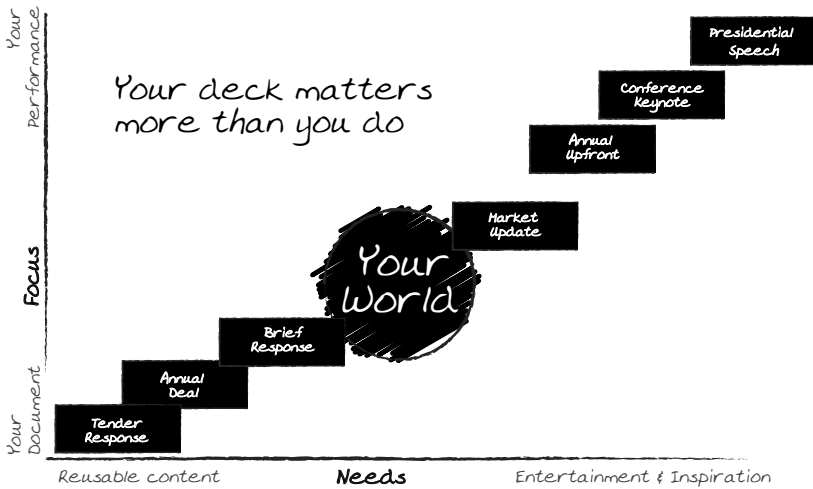
As my experience grew and I spent more time in the intersection of sales and marketing, I began to see the value of this particular course and was grateful I had the opportunity to learn such powerful sales skills. I began to enjoy measuring the impact of my work through the impact on sales. It was an important early lesson that has served me well ever since.

EVERYONE IS SELLING SOMETHING

Many in the media world, from strategists to media owners to agencies and even some within client organisations, don't think their role is to sell; some even see the concept of 'selling something' as beneath them or a little grubby. If you are presenting to get an outcome from the audience, you can call it, think of it or describe it however you like in whatever way makes you feel okay with life, but to me, this is selling. And it is a critical difference between a keynote, inspirational or information-style presentation and what this book deals with: presentations that help you *sell*.

And because in this business the sale is rarely instant or on the spot, I define the 'win' as what you need to happen as a result of this presentation to keep you in the game. How does this presentation give you what you need to connect your ideas to your audience? And how does it give them what they need to take this forward with the confidence to champion what you have shared? That is a win that keeps you in the game. Without this, your ideas are dead and the selling is over.

To win consistently, you have to understand what it takes to create presentations designed to sell your ideas.



To win consistently, you have to understand what it takes to create presentations designed to sell your ideas in this way, and these, as I have learnt and will share with you, don't follow the conventional and corporate rules or approaches peddled by the mass-market training firms geared to a very different style and purpose of presentation. No, you need very specific and tailored tools to successfully sell your ideas.

AND SO, TO THE PRESENTATIONS THEMSELVES

Let's confront the underlying issue that the explosion of online meetings has dramatically highlighted. Most presentations are dull and overly long and, honestly, they are really quite awful at the job they need to do. As a result, very few people are excited by the prospect of sitting through another hour-long carousel of slides.

And there are more internal meetings consuming both time and head space. Agencies have an increasing number of their own products to educate their teams and present their own internal updates on. There are more vendors vying for the attention of media buyers and clients who occasionally take the time to entertain a media owner's presentation.

When there is a moment to share your ideas, that moment is precious and shouldn't be wasted with a presentation that doesn't do

your ideas justice or do anything to give the audience a reason to see you again.

Why am I here?

You probably know that feeling just a few minutes in when it becomes clear that nothing you are seeing is of interest, or it really isn't that clear what you are seeing or why you are there, or how you can use any of this content to support what you need. And now you would rather not be there, but you are trapped for the next 55 minutes unless someone pulls the fire alarm and saves you, or you can fake an important text message that gives you a reason to leave. (Yes, that really does happen, more than you might realise.)

Slide after slide flies across the screen, often more than can be comfortably presented and certainly more than is needed, with the presenter maintaining a healthy jog to try to get through them. The slides are jam-packed, too, overflowing with information, possibly from a misguided attempt to cut down the number of slides by adding more to each slide. The jargon flows in a presentation built around what the presenter wants to share, what they want to tell the world about them and how great they are, but even they stumble and struggle to explain certain slides or fail to cover every point the slide appears to make.

At times it is clear that this isn't one presentation but a collective effort where the joins are obvious as sections clunk together or take a completely new direction as the next person steps up to tell you what they need you to know about how great their products are too, even though it's obvious with what you have already seen so far.

It is clear there has been very little thought given to the person on the receiving end and even less thought to how the content is put together to engage the audience. Sections come and go with no link, connection or flow; I mean, beyond good-looking stock images and the odd cat picture, they do little to draw in the audience or give them a reason to be there, let alone stay for the full hour or be engaged and moved to action. And some presentations should simply not exist at all; they serve no purpose other than to push information out into the world, often information the world didn't ask for or need.

Dale Carnegie makes his view on this very clear in his classic book on interpersonal persuasion, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: ‘You are interested in what you want...the rest of us are just like you: we are interested in what we want. So the only way on earth to influence other people is to talk about what they want and show them how to get it.’

Surely we can do better than this?

Now that’s the rant, but here is the underlying issue. *This isn’t working*. There is great thinking, amazing ideas and incredible solutions to real problems that deserve better.

You probably work in an organisation with products or services of great value to others; otherwise, why would you work there, and why would this organisation exist? You probably have brilliant minds around you, people who inspire you with what they can come up with, and you are excited to share this with the world, convinced you have something of real value to share. And yet, others don’t always see what you see or get as excited as you are. They don’t always call you back or take your ideas forward. You don’t always win.

Days, weeks and months of work are being lost on audiences who can’t keep up and sometimes have no idea what is hitting them, what this all means to them or how they can take what they are seeing and share it with others to get their much-needed buy-in.

And yet you have been trained to present, to become a more articulate presenter. Why is this still happening?

Being a good presenter, even the best presenter, now often confined to a tiny window on a screen of faces, cannot save even an average presentation from crashing and burning, taking with it the great idea, possibly the best idea, maybe even a solution the client really needs but that is now lost in a sea of complexity and confusion.

The issue is not how well you present; it is what you present and why this matters to them, the audience, the people giving up their time to see your content and how they connect with your content and can take what you present and become an advocate for your ideas.

Nancy Duarte made this point beautifully in her book *Resonate*, referring to the need to make this connection: ‘... that connection is

why average ideas sometimes get traction and brilliant ideas die – it all comes down to how the ideas are presented’.

The new testing ground

When I was in charge of strategy for a media sales company, I worked closely with the sales team to construct some of their more significant presentations. Unlike my previous agency and client marketing roles, this team produced a heck of a lot of presentations in all shapes and sizes every day, sometimes several a day. And all of them had one clear goal: to convince someone to buy what we had to sell. To win the business.

This took everything I had learnt and been testing in my presentations to another level. The sales and commercial impact were easy to measure, and subtle changes could be tested at scale quickly. I played with new ways to construct content, tell stories and help the account managers to deliver the message and the audience – the buyer of these ideas – take what we had presented and be able to sell our ideas to someone, using the story and specific slides we had carefully designed to help them do just that.

From process to tools

Since then, countless versions of my strategic process have been designed to aid the creation of more compelling content in more effective presentations for small teams through to global agency networks pitching for billion-dollar contracts.

Over time, my focus shifted from seeing this as a rigid process, a fixed set of steps that must be followed in strict order, to becoming a more flexible methodology that has now evolved into a set of tools that work independently, each solving a specific challenge, as well as working together to build greater depth and capability for those who want to become true presentation masters, to master the art of Strategic Storytelling.

Each stage of learning and refining has led to simplifying the application, broadening it, and increasing its effectiveness as measured through the impact of the training and coaching I now deliver and the feedback I get from those using these tools to achieve more successful and consistent delivery.

TIME FOR CHANGE

Whether you're a sales director, sales manager, account manager, strategist or client charged with presenting ideas you need someone else to connect with, buy into and take forward on your behalf, this book will take you on a journey to build your confidence as a presenter and to move you from being a Hopeful Presenter to a Strategic Storyteller.

And this is why it matters.

The problem I often hear people express when we start working together is that their presentation skills are letting them down; they feel like they could win more if they were better presenters. There is a thought bubble that they need to go to the 'Obama School of Presidential Speaker Training'.

But as we chat, what we learn is that the challenges they face have little to do with their skills on their feet and far more to do with what they are presenting. They can relate strongly to a combination of the following statements:

- ▶ I hope our ideas resonate with someone in the audience.
- ▶ I hope we have something they need.
- ▶ I hope they can see how we can solve a problem for them.
- ▶ I hope we don't overwhelm them with all of our content, acronyms and jargon.
- ▶ I hope they can see the bigger idea in all of the stuff we have.
- ▶ I hope they can find what they need to present our ideas.
- ▶ I hope they can follow along and we don't lose them.
- ▶ I hope I can land all the key points and not get lost in the slides.
- ▶ I hope we don't spend too much time just talking about us.
- ▶ I hope they can remember what this is all about when they come back to review our content in a few days.
- ▶ I hope I can explain why this matters when I get asked what this is all about.
- ▶ I hope I don't need to provide a summary slide, as I have no idea where to start.

They are what I call a 'Hopeful Presenter'. And hope has never been a great sales or presentation strategy in my experience.

As these challenges remain unresolved, they slowly slip down the continuum of darkness. They start to get feedback from clients that they missed the brief and they feel a little baffled. Buyers are ‘forgetting’ them or the vital ideas at the critical point when they are making the decision.

Win rates fall.

They start to question other teams: the strategy team made it too complicated; the ideas team missed the insight and the ideas were too big. There is increasing tension internally; the producers of the great idea and the seller start blaming each other. The strategists start doing their own presentations, losing confidence in sales – ‘They can’t sell my ideas, so I’ll do it.’

Confidence plummets, conversion rates fall further and, under pressure because they are not selling, they start to doubt themselves. If the spiral continues unchecked it can end up with a desperate seller.

Sound a bit dramatic? It’s supposed to be, to get your attention on how bad things can get if this problem is left unchecked or misdiagnosed, and it’s why this book and the change that I see as being possible matters to you.

How many of those ‘hope’ statements resonated with you? They come from listening to those I train and coach and in research conducted for this book, and they have defined the challenges a Hopeful Presenter faces perfectly.

And this is that change, the change I see as being possible from this place of hope to being a confident Strategic Storyteller.

In all my years obsessing about this topic, two things have remained timeless that this book addresses head on:

- ▶ Too many presentations are self-serving and full of internal jargon with badly organised content rendering them complex, confusing and missing what the audience needs to see, so much so that even the most accomplished and polished speaker can’t save them from losing the audience on the day.
- ▶ Great ideas, fabulous ideas, the best strategy, and even the right approach for a client can all easily get lost in the sea of slides in presentations that don’t connect the audience to the content and enable them to take your ideas forward.

When you are just the first presentation of the many required to get your ideas across the line, these two challenges alone will severely limit your success.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

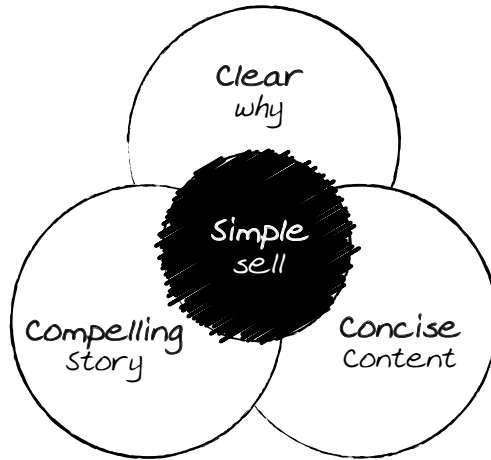
This practical how-to book teaches how to overcome these and other core challenges that stop presentations from winning. It can be used to help refresh this knowledge every time you develop a new presentation on its own, and alongside the training and coaching I deliver on this topic.

In part I, I expand on the context and the unique challenges faced daily by those creating presentations that need to land an idea, get buy-in to a strategy or are charged with selling ideas. Challenges that may need to be better understood to be resolved.

In my experience, it is sadly very rare for clients – the recipients of these presentations – to provide frank and directional feedback, which means it is hard to know how they felt when you presented, what they thought about how you structured and delivered your content and why you didn't get a call back or any follow up and why you didn't win. This first part will change that.

In part II, I unpack the 12 tools, which are organised into the four toolboxes that guide creating presentations. These are:

- ▶ **Clear** about why this presentation exists, who it is for and what matters to them.
- ▶ **Concise** in the organisation and visualisation of the content and being able to turn *every* presentation into a single page.
- ▶ **Compelling** through the story that is told to bring the audience into your content and connect them emotionally to what you have to offer.
- ▶ **Simple**, which is the ultimate goal for a Strategic Storyteller who wants to be armed with the highest-level view of their work, prepared to share this with anyone in any situation while ensuring others are able to take their ideas forward, even if they never see a slide.



From Hopeful Presenter to Strategic Storyteller

These tools can be used individually to raise the bar on a specific skill or area of challenge within the development process or as a set of tools supporting the end-to-end development and delivery of the presentation.

I suggest you read the book through once and then decide which sections of part II are most relevant to you and go back over these, taking the time to apply the exercises as you develop your next presentation or review a current one.

NOBODY LIKES LOSING

My aim with this book, and the training and coaching that sits around it, is that you never have to experience massive presentation failure and make all of the mistakes I made in my early career, and have since gone on to see repeated time and time again. I want to help you avoid that losing feeling. Our BMW presentation, of course, wasn't my only loss, but it was a significant one. These losses and many more wins equate to several hundreds of millions of dollars of sales pitches and wins. From creating, presenting, reviewing and sitting through presentations as the client, I have gathered learnings from seeing tens of thousands of slides. Over the years, these have become tips for

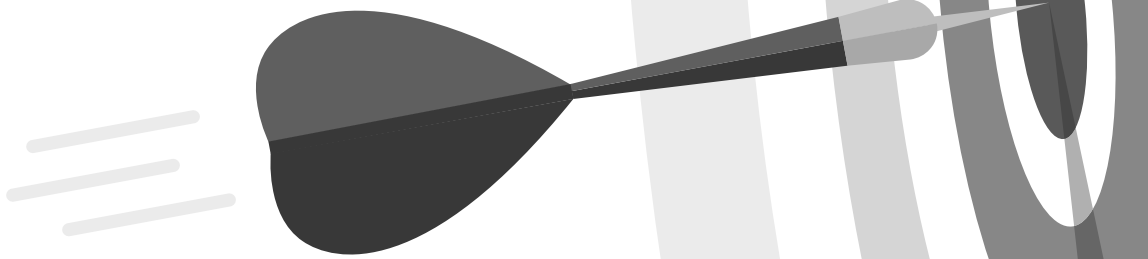
strategists, clients and account managers; they then became tools that are easy to learn, practical and highly effective, and now they form the core of this book.

This book will equip you to create clear, concise, compelling and simple presentations, something I wish I had when we pitched for BMW. We probably would have won because we certainly had the best ideas.

Ultimately, I want you to avoid that sinking feeling when you can see the audience is no longer with you; your great ideas are getting lost in a bad presentation that even you, one of the best presenters, can't save.

Even when you have the best idea, the presentation of that idea can make or break it, and when you don't have the best idea, the packaging of the concept within a well-constructed sales presentation can elevate it to a winner.

Imagine having the best idea in a well-constructed presentation; it's *definitely* a winner.



Part I

WHY THE BEST IDEAS DON'T ALWAYS WIN

CHALLENGES THAT UNDERMINE GREAT IDEAS

Clients don't generally tell you that you bored the pants off them talking about yourself for over an hour, that they didn't understand most of what you presented or couldn't figure out how to make it work for them, or that they were lost after the first 10 minutes and started to write out their to-do list for the week while making it look like they were taking notes.

FIGURING OUT WHY YOUR PRESENTATION WENT WRONG

I often hear people say they don't really know why they didn't win, or they blame something completely unconnected to the actual reason. Internally this becomes 'our idea was not good enough' or 'we missed the brief'. A witch hunt takes place looking for someone to blame when the real cause will probably never be found through your eyes; only the audience knows where it all went wrong.

I will now share the most common challenges that can derail you and stop your presentations from being an effective sales tool that should help you win.

Something for everyone

Have you ever sat through a presentation or even read a book and thought, *This isn't for me, what is this all about?* or *Why am I bothering with this?* That isn't how you want your audience to feel when you present, but I can't tell how often this happens.

This usually occurs when the audience for this specific presentation isn't clearly identified upfront. As a result, different pieces of content get added for everyone 'who might be interested' or who might attend the meeting. All bases get covered. What could have been a clear message for the right audience, addressing a clear problem, becomes a waffly rambling collection of something for everyone.

The hope that *something* sticks, that there is something in this that someone might get excited about, is not a great place to start.

Presentations without an anchor

When you start without a clear idea of who your audience is, what problem they have or what their underlying needs are, you are like a boat in a harbour without an anchor, at risk of drifting off at any moment. And drift you will as the opinions, content and ideas of others creep in during the building of your presentation, because you were not focused enough at the outset.

To take the audience on your journey showing how you solve their problem you don't just need to know what the high-level problem is; you need to understand what it means to them, what the impact is of having this problem and what could be at stake if it isn't solved. This fundamental understanding is core not just to how your presentation can be crafted around a compelling story; it is core to how every story brings a reader in. But this understanding does more than provide a nice way into your story. It is critical to how you establish the value in your ideas for your audience and how you curate the content to make this clear to them.

Solving a specific problem with a narrative aimed at the audience who cares about this being solved ensures your message cuts through with the people who matter, those for whom you deliver real value.

Bland and generic messages

Ryanair is a low-cost airline based out of Ireland, but according to aviation specialist Cirium, which provides analytics and data on air travel, Ryanair Holdings is the world's fifth biggest carrier, Europe's biggest airline and the largest in the world outside the US (home to the top four carriers: American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines and Southwest Airlines).

Since their inception in 1984 with 25 employees and one aircraft, Ryanair have been clear on one thing – who their audience is, and that is the fare-conscious customer. Those who otherwise would have chosen an alternative mode of transportation or not travelled at all.

They have never tried to be anything more to anyone other than the budget-conscious traveller who wants a no-frills service. There have been no attempts at business class or upmarket service offerings. If you want frills, don't fly with Ryanair is clearly the message, and this has played out in everything from advertising to the often controversial comments from the airline CEO, Michael O'Leary, which include this infamous line: 'Are we going to say sorry for our lack of customer service? Absolutely not.' This is all reinforcing that you get what you pay for – and with Ryanair, you are not paying very much.

Now, you might be thinking, *Doesn't this put some people off? Don't they alienate people with comments like this?* And the answer is yes, and that is why it works. This leads to very clear messaging and very direct points that alienate many but attract those who matter most to them: the audience they are targeting who values what they provide. It is a win-win, to the point of winning against established airlines such as British Airways as well as other low-cost carriers such as EasyJet. Knowing your audience means you can speak to them and their specific needs.

While Ryanair's approach may be extreme, I have sadly worked with many clients who miss this point in marketing and waste millions on bland and generic messages in advertising aimed at everyone but targeting no-one, ads that fail to have an impact because no-one cares. And I see this every day in presentations as well, with the same effect.

Know your audience and focus everything on them. This should be a core principle for the design of every presentation.

Generic messaging leads to expansion

When you are not clear about whom you are creating content for, you become generic in your points; you solve general problems with broad and sweeping statements and, worse still, you add more and more content trying to cover not just one problem – where you can deliver real value – but every problem that might exist for those in the room. This is where your presentation becomes bloated with content, waffly, complex and hard to navigate for you and the audience, who are probably wondering why they are there, given so much seems to be aimed at someone other than them.

The more you add, the more you dilute the value of your core idea, which started by solving a specific problem and is now solving all of the world's problems in 90 slides. It becomes harder for the audience to hear your point, and to connect with what you are saying and the benefit to them. This, in turn, makes it harder for them to recall any of what was presented or to find that one useful piece now lost in a sea of content for everyone.

BUT WHO IS MY AUDIENCE?

Now, at this point, I am often asked what to do when you don't know who might attend your presentation; maybe you have a proactive idea (an idea you have developed yourself that you want to take to the world) or the group you present to invites lots of people but only a few ever show up, and you are never really sure who this will be until you walk into the room.

In these instances, you need to move from thinking about your audience as specific people – the names of those attending – to thinking about roles. What type of role within the group you are presenting to has the problem you are solving, and what roles can help carry your ideas forward? Roles exist even without people – vacant roles in organisations, for instance – and roles have characteristics you can determine without knowing who specifically holds that role.

When you think about *roles* and not *people*, you remove the barrier of who might attend and think instead about which roles might have the problem you can solve and, therefore, which roles your ideas matter to.

Then think about what roles would be best placed to take what you present and convey it to others to get their buy-in.

Finally, what roles have influence over how your presentation is viewed – a subject matter expert or a role that controls the budget allocation?

Understanding these issues will enable you to make a call on which roles might attend. You might not know who, but you can view the roles likely to want to be across what you have and the roles you need there to make this a worthwhile exercise for you.

There are two important points here:

- ▶ If there is no-one present who could be the connector of your content to others, no role that has the ability to take your ideas forward, your presentation is unlikely to lead to anything positive and is probably going to be a waste of your time and theirs. Rescheduling when you can present to the right audience would be a better option for everybody.
- ▶ A presentation without a problem to solve is a presentation without a purpose. This means that without clearly defining the problem, you are wandering off into generic territory. You are essentially presenting your ideas and hoping to find a problem they might solve, and if you don't, your ideas will have no value.

Even if you don't have access to the client to undertake a detailed discovery with them before you present or you often pitch proactive ideas, you can still work out what problem you should be solving.

You might have to come up a level from a specific role within a client to look at this from a category perspective. At this level, there will be trade press articles, LinkedIn posts and rants, and a whole world of points of view on problems that companies in that sector are facing. Thinking about which of these your ideas can help solve will give you a good starting point.

By working through the audience in this way, you can move from not knowing who will attend and feeling paralysed about who your audience is to knowing the roles you want your content to resonate with.

THE CONTENT AVALANCHE

There will nearly always be more content than is needed, but how do you know what should stay and what should get left out?

I am very fortunate to have been exposed to this early in my career and have worked on what I call ‘all sides of the fence’ – in roles selling big ideas, strategic solutions and concepts as the strategic lead, and as the client briefing, reviewing and buying these strategies and ideas, as well as within media organisations that survive through the creation of content, audiences and technology solutions and the ability to commercialise this with advertisers’ dollars. Each has given me a different perspective on how content comes together and how it needs to flow into a well-contained and concise structure, as well as what is desired and what is needed on the receiving end of this content.

There will nearly always be more content than is needed, but how do you know what should stay and what should get left out?

It all started so well

All of your organisation’s great resources worked hard to develop something compelling. Or you know you have a solid product and are keen to get this out into the world. In both cases, there is the genesis for a slide deck that should surely convert.

It just keeps coming

Everyone makes what seems like a valid argument for including their suggested content, but you can see there are competing priorities, and then one more ‘new section to drop into the deck’ lands in your inbox.

As the presentation continues to expand, even you are unsure of the point you are trying to land. Slides have come from several different teams: sales priorities, background slides, case studies, research, strategy, process and even team overview and legal slides. Somewhere in there is the solution and the answer to the audience’s problem – if they can find it.

Always more than you need

When you can't control what goes in and what gets left out, it can become incredibly challenging, even frustrating, as you try to stay on top of all the content. When you leave too much in, you dilute your overall message; you can get lost and find it hard to present. The presentation can become hard to follow and confusing for the audience, making it difficult for them to determine whether they should care about specific pieces of information and what is truly important.

How do you say no to well-meaning contributors when everyone has a seemingly compelling reason for their content going in? How can you challenge senior stakeholders who 'know what this needs to be successful' and insist on the same company background and 'about us' slides going in every time?

Without becoming very clear upfront about what this presentation is there to do and the journey you want to take the audience on, defined by key points that form a flowing narrative from problem to resolution, wrestling content into an orderly structure will be incredibly challenging.

The view from the other side

It wasn't until I sat on the other side of the table – being presented to, desperately trying to find the bits of information I needed to take from this fire hose of information coming at me – that I really understood this challenge in all its glory.

As you create a presentation, you become intimately familiar with its content. You see it build. You add the sections and marvel over the incredible image you found. To you, it all makes sense, and that was precisely how I felt every time I built my presentations; I knew every slide, I knew what came next, I knew the point I was making, and I even smiled when an image I was super proud of finding came on screen.

I was a presentation genius.

Or so I thought.

The early indicators were the random audience questions about points I thought I had landed. Didn't you see slide seven with the cat and the baby (great image) under the heading 'We care'? Or the

animation on slide 53 that clearly answered that question? Then the requests would come in for follow-up information, or for us to send over a revised section with particular information that was clear (I thought) in the presentation.

Or – worse – there were no questions at all, just silence.

The fire hose

When I became the client on the receiving end of many more presentations, it became clear what this was all about. I had confused my audiences with too much content that wasn't structured to keep them following along, and to compound things, this made it harder for them to find what they needed after the presentation.

As a client, you are seeing most (or all) of this information for the first time, and you don't know what is coming next or how things connect if it isn't made clear. As more and more content comes at you, it becomes even harder to stay on top of all this new information and make sense of it. It can feel like you are drinking from a fire hose of content. This can be particularly challenging if this is an area you don't know well or spend much time on, and it isn't as familiar to you as it is to the presenter; now, you are drowning.

Inevitably, when there is more content than time allows, the presenter speeds up their delivery in a valiant attempt to deliver 90 slides in under 60 minutes, which just makes this situation worse.

The harder you look, the more lost you get

As a client, I have often felt lost, confused and even frustrated when I could see there was the genesis of a good idea being presented to me but I couldn't see how I could take these slides and present them to my team or how I could explain exactly what was presented further up into the company for buy-in or sign-off. One thing I can be certain of is that if someone is confused by what they have seen, they are sure as hell not going to try to explain it to their boss.

What about this month's sale focus?

Now you might be saying, 'Yes, but how can I challenge a sales director pushing us to include this month's sales focus even if I know it's not the right fit?' I hear you.

However, you both want the same thing: to win the business. And to do that you have to deliver something the audience wants, delivered so they can see the value in your ideas and solutions and they can present on easily. If you miss this, whether you have this month's sales focus included is largely irrelevant because you will not get a call back, let alone land the sale, unless luck is on your side – and I have never favoured that as a tremendous long-term sales strategy.

The challenge of managing content and filtering this all starts when you are not clear on the change you see as possible. This is a simple 'from-to' that defines the beginning and end of your story in which all of your content fits; that is, all of the content that is relevant in getting from the problem to your known resolution.

Without this, you have little basis for making an argument for leaving things out. As a result, almost everything can end up going in. That will never end well. In my experience, the more you cram into one presentation, the harder it becomes to sustain a flow and connection, the less it cuts through, and the more likely it becomes that you will confuse your audience and lose them in the avalanche of slides.

One thing I can be certain of is that if someone is confused by what they have seen, they are sure as hell not going to try to explain it to their boss.

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM – WITH POWERPOINT

Would you believe me if I said that a poorly prepared presentation was a contributing factor to the Space Shuttle *Columbia* disaster in 2003? *Columbia* suffered a catastrophic explosion on re-entry to Earth's atmosphere, killing everybody on board.

When the shuttle launched, a piece of the insulating foam broke off from its external tank and struck the thermal protection tiles on the orbiter's left wing. Similar foam shedding had occurred during previous Space Shuttle launches, causing damage that ranged from minor to near-catastrophic, but some engineers suspected that the damage to *Columbia* was more serious. During a resulting review of the

integrity of the heat shield and the risks of bringing the shuttle back to Earth, the NASA Debris Assessment Team presented its analysis in a formal briefing to the Mission Evaluation Room within NASA that relied on PowerPoint slides from Boeing, who had conducted the tests on the heat shield in the past.

During the investigation of the disaster, Dr Edward Tufte of Yale University, an expert in information design and a pioneer in the field of data visualisation, studied how the slides used by the Debris Assessment Team in their briefing to the Mission Evaluation Room misrepresented key information.

One slide contained critical information, test data and findings relating to the shuttle's ability to withstand this type of incident that, if properly understood by the audience, could have changed the outcome. Here are the four key issues Dr Tufte identified, as summarised in the Accident Investigation Report:

- ▶ The heading didn't land on the critical point of the slide; in fact, it was seen as misleading. If all someone read was the heading, they could believe there was little cause for concern. This was not what the rest of the information on the slide explained, but they concluded that because of the sheer amount of information presented on the one slide, many would just read the heading.
- ▶ The language and layout meant that as the information flowed up within NASA, key explanations and essential information were filtered out as the emphasis on what was critical was not passed on.
- ▶ The slide had six levels of information. However, the information hierarchy wasn't logical, and the most critical information didn't come first. In fact, the most important information was the last point on a slide that contained over 100 words. This point was: 'One estimate of the debris that struck *Columbia* was 640 times larger than the data used to calibrate the model on which engineers based their damage assessments.'

It was determined that had different decisions been made based on this presentation, there may have been a different outcome for *Columbia*

and the seven astronauts. A contributing factor in the loss of the Space Shuttle was the information on the slides wasn't easy to understand, the key points didn't land, and it wasn't easy to present this information without key details getting lost.

If the poor structure of a presentation can contribute to an aerospace disaster, imagine what it could be doing to your chances of landing that strategic presentation.

What guides you?

Rank these statements based on the order in which they are true for you, with one being most true and four being least true, and see what this highlights in your approach to structuring your content.

What guides you when you work to refine your content and build your final presentation?

1. The change you see as possible from the problem to your known resolution.
2. How sections connect to take the audience on a clear journey from their problem to your resolution, keeping only the content that supports these points.
3. What others suggest should be included, whether it is solving the audience's specific problem or not.
4. Content and slides you already have that are easy to drop in, even if they aren't quite on point for this particular presentation.

If 1 and 2 are not your top two, keep reading.

As if I have the time for this!

I know that in some situations when building a presentation, you might not get to see all the content with the luxury of time on your side.

However, once you have learnt how to layer content by laddering up to the most important point to control the flow of information, you can organise your content very quickly. You will be able to arrange

slides like a deck of cards. You can deal the ace and then the king and queen, only going further if there is a real need to unpack detail after this. You can easily filter out the extra and weaker content and the 'add-ons' that don't connect or aren't needed within each section.

SELLING THE INGREDIENTS, NOT THE DISH

When you are hungry and in a rush to get to a meeting and looking to grab some lunch on the go, what is of greater value and utility to you, a tasty and warm ham and cheese toasty or a loaf of bread, packet of ham, some cheese slices, a tub of spread and a sandwich press?

There is a place for ingredients, but when you are trying to sell a premium strategic solution this is not it.

Your organisation will be awash with things you could sell, a veritable market stall of ingredients that could be combined to create solutions that solve problems, creating greater utility that increases both the value and the ease with which someone can buy what you have created for them. Like the warm toasty that solves your hunger and gives you exactly what you need as you whizz by on your way to the meeting. But the toasty doesn't form itself; it is made by bringing ingredients together to package them into a new, more interesting and appealing item.

The market stall of stuff

When you don't do the work, when you don't bring together ingredients to form tasty dishes, when you don't combine elements to make them easier to understand, of greater value and utility and easier to buy, you are putting the market stall on display.

You are selling the stuff that goes into your ideas, the raw ingredients, which brings with it several issues for you and your audience.

Combining creates value

How much would you pay for eggs, flour and water versus some beautiful pancakes to go with your morning coffee?

The ingredients are never worth as much as the dish; your solutions are the same.

When you do the work to bring elements together, your effort to curate and create increases the value of your ideas; conversely, the more you unpack and expose each contributing element (ingredient), the easier you make it for your audience to buy the more minor elements and not the total solution.

You make it much easier for them to negotiate on each item, one by one, devaluing your overall solution bit by bit. Sometimes this happens so stealthily that you hardly notice until it's too late, and you have given away all your IP and creativity for much less than it's worth as a total solution.

Increasing utility and ease

When you present how everything works together to solve your audience's problem and help them move forward, you increase the utility of your offering and make it easier for them to buy from you.

The Hopeful Presenter lays out lots of little pieces for the audience to pick at, like a seagull picking at chips dropped on the ground. The hope is that as the audience picks away, they can find what *they* think they need to help them move forward. They can put the pieces together and solve their problem from the market stall of stuff on display. This is often led by a lack of understanding of the real problem to be solved, which results in putting more *stuff* out in the hope something might just be right and catch their eye.

Sadly, often this simply isn't the case. Instead, they look at everything on display and don't see any usefulness in any of it.

You have also left them with a shopping list of ingredients and no-one to make up something tasty for dinner tonight. They are busy, and when you have finished presenting, they move on to the next presentation or item on their to-do list.

You have made it hard to buy you, so they don't.

When you present how everything works together to solve their problem and help them move forward, you increase the utility of your offering and make it easier for them to buy from you.

By showing how everything works together, you increase the usefulness of your total solution because your audience can now see what this does for them and how it does it for them, why they need all these pieces, and the utility of what you have created for them. And you have made it easier for them too. There is less effort on their part to make sense of everything and, therefore, you become easier to buy; that is a winning approach.

Too much choice can be demotivating

As Barry Schwartz outlines in his great book *The Paradox of Choice*, giving people too much choice can be demotivating. Schwartz found that when consumers were presented with a selection of 24 different jams, only 3% of shoppers purchased; however, when only six jams were on display, 30% purchased.

When you put more out in the hope that something sticks, the opposite can be true, and you get less than if you had limited choice. This is certainly my experience when it comes to how you package your ideas and solutions within presentations.

The fear of too little and too big

Now, some fears often bubble up when I talk about reducing the number of products or ideas that go into one presentation. These are the fear of not having enough and the fear of making an idea too big and so overwhelming the audience when they just might want one part of it.

These fears are the drivers that lead to excessive content and allowing ingredients to be put out on display, *just in case*. There is a discipline to controlling the flow of information as well as curating how many choices you give the audience so they feel they have a degree of control and influence but not so much that they are overwhelmed and paralysed by the volume of information, products and ideas on offer.

Once you have learned how to organise, optimise and visualise your content, you will experience the power of being able to customise the choice while having much more precise control over how far down into the detail you go at any moment during the presentation. It is a skill that, once learnt, you will wonder how you ever survived without it.

A market stall will never charge the same for the ingredients as the restaurant does for the main course made up of the same ingredients. Your job is to become the chef, bringing the ingredients together to create tasty and premium dishes your audiences see as relevant and valuable to them.

Think back over your last few presentations and the outcomes of these. How often did you get the bigger idea across the line, the total solution, versus a client picking away at your content and moving forward with just some of the elements of the solution?

Now have a look at those presentations and give yourself a score from 1 to 5 for each, against these criteria:

- ▶ You have brought elements together and shown how they work together (5) *or* You included lots of ideas and products that the audience could pick at (1).
- ▶ There is a logical flow to the unpacking of the ideas from concept down into detail (5), *or* Everything is on display all at once or in no particular order (1).

Based on your responses, how easy did you make it to buy the total solution you wanted to sell? Which means scoring 4 and above.

IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU

I do not doubt that, given the opportunity, there is a lot you could share about what you do, why it is excellent, maybe how you work to create these great ideas, that unique seven-step process. And then there are all your products, tools and techniques, many of which have been given funky or abstract names to make them sound cool, modern, exciting, unique or premium.

You probably have your own internal language, a derivative of the industry jargon but given your own special twist. It makes your version sound that little bit fancier, more complex and potentially more important.

The question is how much all of this matters, not to you and the team around you who live and breathe this day in and day out, but to your audience?

Why should someone outside your organisation care about any of this?

I often see sales presentations that are just a story about the organisation, about what they do and how they do it. ‘Can I have an hour of your time to come and talk exclusively about me and how great our company is?’ ‘No,’ would be my answer. How about you?

The question is how much all of this matters, not to you and the team around you who live and breathe this day in and day out, but to your audience?

Balance offsets boredom

The point is there needs to be some balance. Even if you are asked to present pure credentials, a ‘why you’ presentation, there needs to be some consideration given to what each part of your story means to your audience, why they should care, what benefit they get from whatever point you are making, and how it helps them solve a problem or move forward.

Without this, you risk boring them with a presentation that does little to connect and is easily forgotten.

By way of a straightforward but far too common example for my liking, it is nice that you have offices in every part of the country and can present a pretty map with the number of people in each location. But how often has that slide been presented to a client with one office and doing business from that one location? What is the value to them of your multi-location offering and smattering of people around the country who this client will never work with? Unless they need a multi-office solution, unless they see value in your network of offices, you just wasted a slide and five minutes on something that is just about you.

Other common sections that can lead you into an ‘all about me’ moment are:

- ▶ the company history or timeline, companies that have merged, and when new products were acquired and added

- ▶ the strategic approach or steps to creating ideas
- ▶ product catalogues and overviews of everything you do
- ▶ market share, audiences sizes and audiences by location
- ▶ approach to collecting, sorting and storing data.

It is not always that these sections shouldn't be in your presentation, but without thinking about the 'so what?', which is the benefit of this to your audience, you risk losing the audience's attention and engagement, particularly if this is the majority of the content you have in the whole presentation.

I was chatting to a chief marketing officer about this book and this particular topic came up and, before I could finish, they jumped straight in to tell me about a recent pitch they had just run to find a new agency partner. In a very animated fashion, they went on to say: 'We could not believe it. It was all about them, some magic process we were supposed to believe nobody else had ever come up with, all their proprietary tools with names that made no sense, of which I think I can recall one but couldn't tell you what it does or why we need it. And then, they finished off with why they thought they were amazing. They appeared to be oblivious to the fact that there was literally nothing in their 60-odd slides that gave us any reason to give a sh*t. They left thinking they did an amazing job, buzzing and probably slapping each other on the back, and will have no idea why they will never hear from us again.'

Sadly, in my experience this is not a one-off example but a common problem for both agencies and media sellers who spend way too much time just presenting 'about us' slides with no consideration to the 'so what?' for the audience.

The what and the why

You are probably thinking, *Hang on a minute here, surely they need to know who we are, what we do, how we do it and what makes us different, brilliant and amazing?*

Absolutely, they do.

Balance is about all these things in combination with the 'so what?' for them. When you can marry what you do with why that's a benefit

to the audience, when you can describe how you do something along with what this enables or delivers for them, when who you are is aligned with what they value, then you can craft a narrative that will have meaning and depth to this specific audience. That is when your presentation has balance.

The other extreme is also to be avoided – just landing a stream of benefits for them with no substance behind what or how you deliver these amazing outcomes. A string of slides that promises to ‘engage your audience, with transparency, in real time, maximising your first-party data, driving conversion, maximising profit and top-line growth’ can become a game of buzzword bingo. This can feel shallow, lacking the substance and validation needed to give your audience confidence in your ability to deliver.

This can create dissonance between what you say and what they believe is possible based on what they see. They can become challenged by how amazing you are at hitting all the hot topics, but unclear exactly how you do it and, indeed, if you can.

Balance is about why the audience should care about your point, what this does for them and how you do it. When this works in harmony, you will avoid boring your audience or leaving them wondering.

CHECK YOUR BALANCE

Take a moment to go through one of your more detailed presentations – something, say, over 20 slides.

- ▶ How many of these slides describe how you came up with the work or what you do, your products and services? (about you)
- ▶ How many describe what the work does and the benefit or value it delivers to the audience? (about them)
- ▶ How many of your slide headings are named after or include references to your approach, or the name of your tools, products or the things you want to sell? (about you)
- ▶ How many slide headings give the audience a reason to care about what is on that slide and what it means to them? (about them)
- ▶ Where is your balance right now?

Everything can have value

I know many organisations have a fixed set of ‘about us’ slides or something similar they insist are included in every presentation.

While it would be clear I am not a fan of this generic approach, let us work with what we have. If you are faced with having to include a certain set of slides in every presentation, after each generic section create a specific slide that summarises the ‘so what?’.

This new slide should make the connection between what you have just presented and what this delivers for the audience. Don’t assume they will make this connection or that it is obvious or it doesn’t matter; what you think is obvious is often completely missed by your audience, and you don’t want to have long stretches of content that has no meaning for the audience if you want to keep them engaged.

THE LAST-HOPE TAXI RIDE

PowerPoint is reluctant to open; there are so many slides. You know you cannot get through them in the time you have, and with one tech hiccup you are done for. It’s unclear where you can summarise because the slides jump from point to point and don’t have clean sections to make edits easier.

Safely away from prying eyes, it’s time for one last attempt to create some order in the taxi ride to the meeting. The appendix looks like a good place to dump slides that should never have made it this far. It is one last-ditch effort to create some semblance of a flow, to join things together. One more set of traffic lights and this might be possible.

That growing sense of dread

You know what you have still isn’t what you want to present. It’s long, doesn’t flow as well as you would like, feels clunky to you and you know most of the content, and still, you are not as confident as you could be in remembering all of the critical points.

It isn’t clear from the navigation what is coming next. The slide headings aren’t that helpful at reminding you what each slide is about, let alone guiding the audience and helping them keep up with you and find the key points in your narrative. And there are slides that

even you are not sure what the point of them is, and it's too late to get rid of them now.

How many times in the last few months have you found yourself frantically trying to organise slides in the final few moments before you have to present?

How many times have you created an appendix just to 'store slides' you don't have anywhere else for?

How often do you walk into a meeting knowing what you have is not the best story you could tell, or knowing there is no story at all but you have run out of time to make any more changes?

Sometimes the last few hours before you present is the first time you see everything together. While not ideal, I get that this happens and is often out of your control because you rely on other teams for content and to deliver slides for you to collate into a final deck.

Imagine if there was a way to quickly organise content, define a narrative and connect each section. That would surely help in such situations, as well as when you have more time to work through this properly, wouldn't it?

The missing link is knowing how to structure your content into a story, a story that has predefined sections with clear navigation through a flowing narrative. And the good news is there is only one structure you need to learn that will guide every presentation. Once you have mastered this, even in the last few hours you can quickly make a call on how to edit and move content. You will be able to look at each part of the deck and decide if it could be shorter to make the point you need to make. You will know how to work on sections rather than looking at the whole deck and being overwhelmed by just how much content you have and not knowing where to begin, with the pressure of the clock ticking down.

THE GREATEST SHOW WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH

You have made it to the meeting, the deck you are about to present is a bit of a dog's breakfast, but all will be good because you are an exquisite presenter, right? You have been through countless rounds of presentation training and with your amazing-looking slides – polished and refined by your in-house design team – you've got this.

You are confident you can deliver a performance so marvellous that nobody will notice that what is on the slides bears little resemblance to what you are saying.

Showtime myths

Two myths exist regarding the role of the presenter that we must address at this point.

Firstly, there is a school of thought that a great presenter with great-looking slides can save even an average presentation from going down the toilet. That may be true in some situations, but when you are presenting anything more than the most basic idea that someone can buy on the spot, this is not the case. What you put on the screen, what is on the slides, the story you tell and the content you leave behind *must* support you as the presenter and the audience to take your content forward. The greatest show will never be enough.

The second myth, accentuated by the first, is that you need to be an amazing presenter to sell ideas. And that is also not true.

Hang on, are you saying I can be a rambling nervous wreck and not get fired? No. But you don't need to be Tim Cook delivering an Apple keynote presentation in front of the world's media for the latest iPhone, or Barack Obama delivering a presidential speech, which is what many will have you believe.

It's easy to see why you might think being a great presenter is the key to getting your ideas to land and convincing your audience to partner with you, because this is where most 'presentation skills training' has been focused.

But this training wasn't developed with you or your needs in mind. It was designed for a completely different style of presentation, and it has led to an overemphasis on things that are not as critical for what you need. This can undermine and even destroy the confidence of an otherwise okay presenter, who is being told they are not good enough when they have adequate presentation skills but have woeful presentations that are losing them business.

You don't need the level of delivery prowess of, say, a CEO delivering an update to all staff and investors or presenting at a conference on a stage in front of thousands of paying guests or at annual events.

Here the delivery is critical to the impact of the message; the CEO is there to inform and inspire. The audience hangs on every word. The tone, pace, clarity and how each point is articulated really matter.

Take a CEO who looks nervous, stumbles and rushes through certain key points and appears to have forgotten elements of others; how will they go at instilling the required confidence in the team they lead and who are there to be inspired by them? For their most important presentations, CEOs of the country's top companies will have dedicated speech writers, and then weeks of rehearsals will follow with a coach to refine and fine-tune the delivery, because their delivery is everything.

How many of the presentations you deliver are ready in time for two weeks of rehearsals in front of a speaking coach? What would change if you had this luxury?

Quite frankly, not a lot, because your delivery isn't as important as theirs.

In the absence of really understanding what is happening, the solution to underperforming sales presentations and even underperforming sales teams is often to fund more presentation skills training: 'We need to make them more confident on their feet, more articulate and able to work the room better.'

But this misses the critical understanding of the nuances of striking the right balance of delivery, content and design for what you and your audience need. When you are delivering this book's style of presentation, what you present, and how you structure and curate the content carry as much, if not slightly more, weight and importance as how well you do on your feet as a presenter. Hence, this is a whole book dedicated to just this topic!

CLOSING YOUR GAPS

Since the rest of this book is all about closing the gap on what is missing for those who need presentations that help them sell and how to structure a winning presentation, let me clarify what is needed from you and your presentation skills that this book *won't* cover, so that if these are still gaps for you, you can seek out the right training and support for your needs.

You need to do more than read the slides

Let's talk about your role and what is required of you – the basic skills that, if not already in place, do still need to be worked on and are not part of what this book will cover.

The difference between a document and a presentation is you and your colleagues appear in the room (or on a screen for our much-loved online meetings) to narrate all or part of the content.

You are there to add value beyond just emailing the document through. At least, I hope that is why you are turning up, a bigger role than delivering the cupcakes.

Your role as the presenter is to bring what would otherwise be a flat document to life. In doing so, you can ensure that the key information is both seen and understood. You can emphasise, clarify, expand with additional information, share an example that can't be documented or left behind and, of course, you can leverage your personal delivery style to enhance engagement and keep the audience focused when you need their attention.

You do need to be skilled enough to do more than read the slides; if your audience is old enough to read, they don't need you there just to narrate what they can read in their own time. And you do need to be able to manage your nerves and not crumble at the first tricky question or, as I have seen – sadly, more than once – leave the room mid-presentation when the pressure overwhelms you. Your presence and how you hold and manage the room, as well as how you leverage the technology and environment to support you and how well you know your content and manage the pace of the presentation to keep the audience following along, never too fast that you lose them and not so slow that they can become distracted and tune out – all of this is important.

You do need to be skilled enough to do more than read the slides; if your audience is old enough to read, they don't need you there just to narrate what they can read in their own time.

A well-told story helps us to recall information, and you are the storyteller, there to get this story across and into the memories of your expectant audience.

There is a skill to all of this, and learning and developing this *does matter*, just not as much as many would have you believe. But still, you do want to invest time in becoming the best presenter you can; just remember this isn't everything and *will never be all you need* to win.

If you don't already have a good idea of how you come across when you present, there are a couple of simple ways to find out.

The first is to record yourself; even just an audio recording of your next presentation, with the audience's permission, will give you immediate feedback on your delivery style. You will hear your confidence, and the tone and the speed at which you deliver. You will also hear any subconscious phrases you use when you get nervous or lost in the presentation. All valuable insights to begin to work on your delivery. This, of course, has become easier now with the increase in online presentations. Make an effort to sit and watch yourself present when a meeting is recorded. As painful as it can be to see ourselves on the screen, there is no better way to learn where you can make small changes that will make a huge difference. You might be surprised at how many little things you do, say or repeat that you didn't realise you were doing.

Next, you can seek feedback from your colleagues who are with you when you present or a client to whom you have recently presented. The truth is that most people struggle to give really honest and constructive feedback in this area. My advice to make this easier and more valuable is to be specific in your request. Detail three or four areas you want feedback on – such as pace, tone, confidence and clarity of delivery – and then give them a simple 1 to 5 scale to choose from. Then ask for one thing you do really well and one thing they think you could improve. You can vary what you ask each person, and you will start to build a picture of where you can focus or get help.

The clearer you are on the areas you want or need to work on, the easier it will be to home in on the right support. Presentation skills training is a vast area, with many thousands of books, courses and trainers willing to take your hard-earned salary, and you already know my view that a lot of this isn't as relevant to you as they will tell you

it is. Get clear on what you need first, and then seek the right level of support to close your personal gaps.

THE SILENCE

It's been 10 days since you presented, and there is only deathly silence. No questions, no follow-up. A quick check – did I block their number by accident? Have their emails been going to spam? What is happening over there? Should I call to 'check in'? Maybe hang out in the lobby to bump into them by chance?

When your audience returns to the three to five presentations they saw 10 days ago, how easy is it for them to:

- ▶ recall your key points?
- ▶ remember what each point meant to them and how it helped them move forward?
- ▶ find the supporting information that brings these key points to life?
- ▶ take out one, two or three slides that they can use to summarise everything you presented?
- ▶ present your ideas to others?

Can they become you?

At the end of the day, how well you know your content, how excited you are about your ideas, and how practised and rehearsed you are – none of these things matter if your ideas don't land for your audience, and if they don't connect with the content in such a way that they can now champion your ideas. This means constantly asking yourself if you have made it as easy as possible for them to become you.

None of these things matter if your ideas don't land for your audience.

You don't want your audience to give up on your content after just one presentation.

The challenge is that they don't easily recall as much as you might think.

In the all-time classic sales methodology book *Spin Selling*, Neil Rackham shares his research into how much of a sales presentation gets recalled. Here is what he learnt:

- ▶ The average seller made eight key points during a presentation.
- ▶ Immediately after the presentation, potential customers could remember an average of 5.7 of these.
- ▶ One week later, more than half had been forgotten, and only 2.5 of the original eight remained.

And with this reducing recall went their enthusiasm to buy. Immediately after the presentation, customers gave high ratings for their probability of buying. However, after just a week, the average rating for those same customers indicated they were now unlikely to buy.

Firstly, an average of eight points for a presentation would be a delight to see. (I have seen that many points on a single slide, but we will address this later.) The point Neil is making, supported by his research, is that just because you presented doesn't mean it was understood, can be recalled and has increased your chances of getting the win you desire.

After just one week, only two key points could be recalled.

Let me ask you this:

What if there are only two points that could be recalled from your last presentation? Have you made it clear what these should be? And made them stand out and easy to find?

If you haven't, you are hoping of all the points you made – and I am going to guess there are probably more than eight – that the most important ones just happen to be the ones that make it through.

Structure for you and them

You might think that after seeing your presentation just once it would be impossible for them to know everything about what you do, your products, services and ideas, and that there is no way they can take this and do an effective or even half-decent job of presenting this to others.

And that is the challenge that can only be overcome by how you structure your presentation and curate your content to not only support you in the delivery but also make it as easy as possible for someone to champion your ideas when you are not there to fill in the gaps.

Unless you are selling a simple solution and you have the decision-maker in front of you every time so you can close the sale there, you must learn how to empower your audience to take your key points and sell these on your behalf.

The Hopeful Presenter relies on the good fortune that something sticks or there is someone in the audience who either cares enough or knows enough to carry their ideas forward. The Strategic Storyteller constructs their story to make it clear what is important and to make it easy to find what information and slides support the selling of their ideas.

When you are selling solutions that contain multiple elements, connecting products to form campaigns, when you are selling strategic ideas that solve complex problems, such as multi-layered digital solutions with multiple sources of data and different service offerings, and when there are third parties evaluating your presentations on behalf of others, this is when the game changes significantly, and so does the nature of what you have to deliver.

With all of these, it is unlikely you will present once, have all stakeholders in the room and receive the go-ahead on the spot. Closing the sale at that moment just isn't going to happen.

You might present to the agency acting on behalf of the client, and the client only sees a fraction of what you presented, maybe a slide or two. Within the agency, multiple roles will pour over your slides and pick them apart before the client ever hears about or sees any of your content. Within the client team, they take the agency work and cut this down further to share for feedback, buy-in and sign-off.

All of this time, what you delivered once is having to continue to convey the points you made to people who have never seen you present. This is the game-changing difference between selling and presenting to win. Your presentation has to do a lot more work after you leave for you to win.

If the first person you present to struggles to recall just 30% of what you presented, and then on top of that you make it challenging,

if not impossible, to find the critical points in your presentation and to find slides that are easy for them to present on, you diminish the enthusiasm for your idea – and with that goes your chances of staying in the game.

How well are you doing?

Find a recent presentation, one where you were looking to land critical information, sell a strategic idea or similar. Put the presentation onto slide sorter view:

- ▶ How clear is your story if you just read the titles?
- ▶ Now decide which are the three most important slides; yes, just three. (It should just be one, but we will get to that.)

And then give each of these three slides a score from 1 to 5 for the following:

- ▶ How well do just these slides land the main points of the presentation?
- ▶ How well do the headings convey the critical point of the slide?
- ▶ How clearly do they show how you solve a specific problem for the audience?
- ▶ How easy is finding the essential point on the slide after the heading?
- ▶ How well does the information on the slide flow logically from the header to the next point on the slide?
- ▶ What do you want someone to take away from this slide? How likely is it they would say that if they were presenting this slide without you?
- ▶ How many slides could your audience use to present your idea without you there to explain them?

The slides you want your audience to find and use easily are the ones that sell your idea on a page and clearly state the benefits you deliver through the way you solve their problem.

Make it clear what you want them to find

You might wonder, *How do I know what slides they will need?* The truth is you won't know exactly what slides they need, but you can make it abundantly clear to them which slides you think are the most important and they should use in the way you construct your slides and bring your presentation together.

The slides you want them to find and use easily are the ones that sell your idea on a page and clearly state the benefits you deliver through the way you solve their problem. These should be clear and present in every presentation where there is any chance you won't get what you need in the first showing.