

Four Steps to Improve Your Presentation Style

By Joey Asher

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A UCLA Psychology Professor named Albert Mehrabian did a study in 1971 of the way we communicate and found that 55 percent of the impression that we make is based on physical things like facial energy, posture, gestures, and eye contact. He found that 38 percent of the impression we make is based on how we sound.

That leaves 7 percent for content.

This is one of the most famous studies in the public speaking business. It is often cited for the idea that content doesn't matter.

That's absurd. Content matters a lot.

But don't disregard Dr. Mehrabian's study. People judge us based on how we look and how we sound. Here are four steps to improving your communication style without the help of a coach.

Step 1. The next time you give a presentation, record it with a video camera. If you've never done this, it can be shocking and revealing. Working with an attorney recently, I showed her a brief clip of her presentation before I gave her any feedback. "Oh dear," she said, somewhat shocked. "I look like a slug." The camera showed vividly how bored she looked. I often tell my clients that the camera is a far better coach than I am. Nothing beats seeing how you appear to others.

Step 2. Look first for eye contact. If your eye contact is down at the floor or directed solely at your notes, then you have a problem that must be corrected immediately. Failure to make eye contact makes connection with your listeners impossible. You should be having random, miniature conversations with individual members of your audience. To practice eye contact, set up chairs around the room and make eye contact with imaginary audience members. At our offices, we have Halloween masks mounted on sticks that we place in chairs to pose as listeners.

Step 3. Listen for vocal energy. This is where most people can make the biggest improvement. You have to sound excited about your ideas. One of the most common things that clients will say when I show them their videotapes is simply, "I don't sound enthusiastic." To improve passion, try speaking about something you're passionate about, forcing yourself to get overly excited. You want to sound like you're having an animated dinner conversation with a close friend.

Step 4. Look for facial energy. While watching the videotape of yourself, turn off the volume. Do you look excited? When I first saw myself on camera, I was appalled at my flat facial energy. I forced myself to smile for a month. My "smiler" muscles ached. To fix facial energy, exaggerate. Do more with your eyebrows and your eyes. It may feel weird, but it will look good. As Billy Crystal said, "It is better to look good than to feel good."

As attorneys, we tend to think that the only thing that matters when we talk is content. But if you want to connect with others, pay attention to how you look and sound.

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