



7 TIPS FOR PRESENTING TO SENIOR EXECUTIVES

When it comes to presenting, knowing how to present to senior executives within your own company or another company is going to have the biggest impact on your career. Some presenters figure it out to their great success. Other people crash and burn only to lament an opportunity missed.

I've compiled a series of tips that will hopefully come in handy the next time you're going to present to a CEO, CMO, Senior VP, VP, etc. For example, you might be proposing a promising new social media initiative to marketing executives at your company or pitching a prospect's executives on a new web-based payroll solution. My suggestions will focus on the **boardroom situations rather than keynote presentations**. Boardroom presentations are typically two-way interactions in smaller, more personal settings (e.g., meeting room, office, etc.) compared to the one-way interactions with large, anonymous groups of executives at business conferences.

You'd be wise to consider the following suggestions:

1) Start Strong

Starting strong is important for any presentation and audience, but you might find senior executives slightly less forgiving. Starting strong with executives means giving them confidence that you're going to use their time wisely. You gain their confidence by establishing a **clear direction** for what's going to be covered and what the **desired outcome** is.



*A good start is critical
© Shutterstock*

Executives are frequently going from meeting to meeting — often not always knowing what the exact purpose of the next meeting is. Their admin assistant may have accepted the meeting on their behalf or they may not have had time to review any information prior to the meeting. You need to tell them why they're there and why your topic is important to them.

2) Use Your Time Effectively

Senior managers' time is valuable. They have 20+ other things they could be doing in the 10-60 minutes they have given you. Be prepared to **cover your content in the time allotted**. Also, **leave ample time for discussion or questions**. I was recently in a presentation to several VPs where the presenters delivered a great presentation but left no time for discussion and questions at the end.

Unfortunately, they missed an opportunity for the senior executives to discuss the presentation content, buy into the recommendations, and determine a plan of action. The executives had to run to their next meeting.

3) Be Flexible While Presenting

It's common for senior executives to ask you to **jump back to a previous slide or fast forward through your slides** to a particular section of your presentation. Don't be surprised when executives interrupt you as you present a painstakingly crafted slide with "Got it. Next". Fight the urge to scream "I spent 5 hours on this slide!" and reinterpret those three words as "Great job on this particular slide. I understood its main point. Please move on."



*Be flexible and incredible
like Elastigirl © Disney*

An extended discussion on a particular slide may mean you need to whip through other less important slides in order to get back on track in terms of covering all of your slides. In some cases, you may even forgo covering all of your slides because the discussion on a particular aspect of your presentation is going really well. The key is to **be flexible and cover what they want to focus on — not necessarily what you want to**. In order to achieve your objectives (e.g., more resources, budget, executive support, etc.), you may not need to go through every slide.



4) Be Ready with Supporting Data

Don't make the mistake of not being able to answer a senior manager's question during your presentation. Executives are experts at finding holes in your logic or content. They want to be sure you **understand the consequences and implications**, and that they can **trust your analysis and recommendations**.

I made the mistake of including some preliminary survey data that indicated that customers felt differently about a particular company practice. I thought the data was interesting, but when the senior VP shouted "bull sh!t" I knew I had made a terrible mistake including it in my presentation. I should have either gathered more information on the surprising insight to verify it or left it out of my presentation entirely.

It's a best practice to **anticipate potential questions** by identifying what content could be susceptible to further questioning. Be prepared with **additional supporting data** on any parts of your presentation that could be viewed as counter-intuitive, unexpected, challenging to current opinion or practices, or result in significant changes. You may need to have additional data at your fingertips, including back-up slides in an appendix section or a spreadsheet ready to go. Senior executives often take comfort in the fact that you have tortured the data.

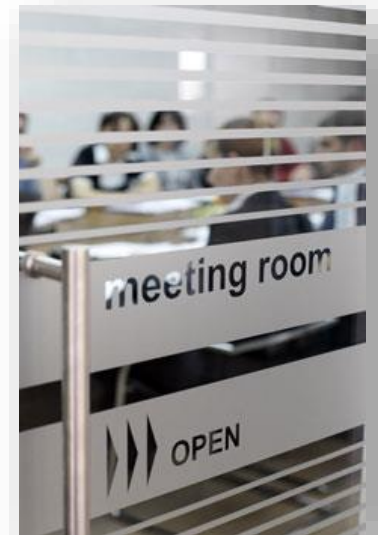
5) Know Your Audience

It's always important to know your audience and in the case of senior executives it is imperative.

- How much do the VPs know about your topic? (i.e., how much time should you spend on providing background information?)
- What topics are hot buttons or particularly interesting to the executives based on their current business goals?
- Which executives would be politically threatened by your recommendations?
- What can you find out about their **pet peeves or preferences?**

For example, I worked at one company where the CEO hated when people substituted "challenge" or "issue" for the word "problem". He wanted people to call problems what they were. It's better to avoid pet peeves such as this one that can unnecessarily sidetrack a presentation.

You need to **find an insider who can coach you** on how to best present your material to the targeted executive or group of executives. That person could be your executive sponsor, one of the executive's direct reports, their admin assistant, or another peer/next-level manager who has interacted with your audience on a regular basis. You're looking for inside information on your audience so that you can avoid [derailing your presentation](#) and wasting everyone's time.



Before you open that door, you should know what you're heading into. © Shutterstock

6) Keep It Simple

In a [study](#) that asked top executives at several large companies how people could present more effectively to them, the overall feedback was to make the presentations **shorter and more candid**. The researcher found that **“Senior people don’t have time to learn about your topic. They just want to know how they can help you.”** Remove extraneous information that could take your discussion off track or cloud your main points. You **lean towards focusing on the bottom-line** in presentations to executives. The more simple and candid your presentation is, the easier it will be for your executive audience to understand how they can help you and move things forward.

7) Be Prepared

For most of us, opportunities to present to the senior management team don’t happen every day. A key to seizing the moment is to be prepared, which may mean conducting an exhaustive analysis and review of the topic, carefully building slides that clearly and succinctly convey your message, creating back-up slides with supporting data, rehearsing your slides several times, seeking peer feedback prior to presenting, etc.



Be prepared like a Wilderness Explorer © Disney

Being prepared means that you will be **more confident** in these intimidating situations. You’ll also be **more flexible** when executives throw curve balls your way such as switching the focus to a whiteboard instead of reviewing the rest of your slides. Your preparedness and polish will leave a **positive impression** on your executive audience — one that will benefit your career long-term.

What has been your experience?

I’m sure many of you have had different experiences with senior executive presentations — both good and bad. I’d love to hear your war stories and what valuable lessons you have learned along the way. If you’re a senior executive, I’d love to hear your perspective as well.

While writing this blog post, I found a couple of related articles on this subject which may be helpful to you. Good luck with your senior executive presentations in 2010!

- [“Now That We Have Your Complete Attention...”](#) (Eric Matson, Fast Company)
- [“Presenting to the Big Dogs”](#) (Marsha Redmon, Bnet)