

Open Your Presentation with Pizzazz — Tell a Story

Stories engage and resonate, and lead to successful, profitable presentations

BECAUSE I ENJOY TELLING STORIES, ESPECIALLY in business situations, my first thought was to begin this treatise with a story about a poor method for opening a presentation so that you can learn how dreadful this kind of opening can be.

This opening, one that you probably see and hear far too often and most likely bores you to doze off, seems to pervade far too many presentations. But I figured you would be so bored reading about it that you would not even make it to the end of this first paragraph. Understandable.



Story. Instead, I'm going to start by telling you a story about one of the first times I ever gave a presentation, and how I quickly learned how to start with an engaging opening.

The day before, I was practicing my presentation in front of a valued colleague, Philip. So I started:

"Good evening. Thank you all for coming here tonight. It's so good to see all of you. I'm excited to speak to you about..."

"Stop!" Philip exclaimed.

I stopped. And looked at him. "What?"

"Rich, that is just about the most boring way to start. Everybody is so used to hearing that crap, that they immediately stop listening."

"But," I protested. "I want to welcome them."

Philip frowned. "And fall asleep," he continued

"And thank them," I feebly added.

"Forget that crap. You want people to listen from the moment you open your mouth, to be on the edge of their seats, to hang on your every word."

I smirked. "This is a business meeting. I'm supposed to tell them how they can communicate better with their prospects and customers. That's got to inherently be a bit tedious."

We just looked at each other a bit, Philip with that you-just-don't-get-it look on his face.

"Hang on my every word," I said a bit sarcastically. "Right."

Philip continued to stare at me. There was that momentary stillness between us where time seemed to suspend. Somewhere in that stillness, I capitulated.

"Okay," I said with some resignation. "What do I do then?"

He paused for effect.

"Tell them a story," he said quietly.

A confused look crossed my face.

"A story?"

"Yes. A story," he reiterated.

"A story!" I said again, incredulously.

"People love stories," Philip continued. "Tell them a story about communicating with customers, about marketing to prospects. Something with a beginning, middle, and end. A story with substance, purpose, and meaning. Something with an edge, a conflict that gets resolved in the end. A story with a moral... or a lesson."

"A story," I said warming to the idea.

"Sure. People identify with stories in many different ways. They can be entertained by your story, and relate your story to their own experiences. Hopefully, they'll get some greater insight as a result, something that resonates with them. That is what they will remember. Stories can be incredibly powerful."

I thought about that for a moment.

"If you tell them a story," Philip added, "even if they can't relate your story to their own experiences, they will at least be able to empathize with your story, and by association, with you. They

will be carried by the story, because if it's captivating, they will pay attention until the very last word. They will want to know the resolution, how it worked out."

I smiled at him. I liked this idea.

In my mind's eye, I saw myself telling the story, engaging the audience, looking them in the eye, watching their reactions, getting into the flow. Emoting. I knew just the story I would tell too. I could just picture the entire interaction.

As if on queue, Philip continued.

"Plus, when you tell a story, people visualize it. They see it in their mind. They not only hear the words, but those words paint a picture in their mind. And you know as well as I that being able to visualize something is paramount to understanding, to remembering, to... well, getting it," he finished triumphantly.

The presentation. The presentation came. To dispense with formalities, the business group's director introduced me.

I immediately launched into my story. No pleasantries, no thank yous, no welcomes; just story. And I watched their faces. Many looked surprised.

I moved across the front, first one side then the other. I walked down the aisle. I made points by looking various people in the eyes. I even threw in humorous epithets to describe a couple of the story's characters. At the end, there were many questions: some about the topic, others about people's experiences, and some about my story. Clearly, the story resonated with them.

There are many reasons to tell a story when you present. Presentations are all about your audience, and stories engage your audience. Besides, engaging stories move you toward humanity. 🌟

—RICH MAGGIANI

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