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## PRESENTATIONS WITH CREDIBILITY: THE 20-MINUTE PLAN

There may be nothing so depressing as looking at your calendar and discovering you have to give a presentation. The pressure is on to make it good, but time is running out. What do you do?

Too often the answer is the wrong one: put it off until the last minute. A busy marketing executive I know fell into just this monthly rut: Hating to even think about putting together a big presentation, she would procrastinate until the night before a big meeting. Then she would spend the whole night typing up her report, wasting valuable time trying to get every word just right. Without allowing time for practice, her lifeless reading the next day made her appear unprepared and uninterested. When she saw the training videotape I had prepared from one of these performances, she was horrified and knew something had to be done.

No matter what stage you have reached in your career, presentations are essential to your credibility. Most people, consciously or not, make a connection between speaking skill and professional competence. Most of us are perfectly comfortable making conversational, off-the-cuff presentations with friendly audiences, like staff. But we lose the confidence to be ourselves in formal settings, in front of intimidating groups – and it shows.

But there is a way to take the anxiety out of preparing and delivering most presentations. It's a simple method that shouldn't take more than 20 minutes to do, including time for practice.

The hardest part about getting started is knowing where to start. Think about all the mediocre or miserable presentations that you've seen – and I'll bet you've seen a lot. Now think about the really good ones. Where you begin makes all the difference.

The very worst thing you can do as a speaker is to talk about what is important to you. The first rule of any presentation is: know your audience. People are there to hear you talk about them. So, begin by asking: what does the audience want to know?

That sounds like a no-brainer. But you'd be surprised how many speakers forget the responsibility that goes with being center-stage.

Think first about the audience. Write down the questions you think they would ask. Organizing a presentation is the hardest part, and knowing where to begin is half the battle.

Let's say you are giving a talk on your company's new media plan. In two to three minutes, if you put yourself in your audience's shoes, you should be able to write down 10 to 12 questions they are likely to bring up. The list would look something like this:

- What are we doing and how does it affect me?
- Why are we doing it?
- What's it going to cost?
- How did we decide on this plan?
- Why do we think it will work?
- What decisions do I have to make?
- What alternatives are there?
- When is it going to happen?
- How will we measure success?
- Who gets credit for this idea?

After you have asked the questions, spend the next several minutes answering them. Talk out each bullet point. If necessary, jot down notes next to each point. To be certain you're getting it right, record your talk on an audiocassette. Listen, revise, and then go back and practice one more time. Don't look now but you've just written your speech, and you know it will be a good one because it tells the audience what the audience wants to know. You'll have the added benefit of avoiding surprise follow-up questions, since your presentation should have answered most of them in the first place. Most important, you'll sound brilliant. There is nothing more compelling and memorable than a speaker who gives a speech to an audience while appearing to have a conversation – and enjoys herself while she is there.

The marketing executive who revised her strategy for preparing presentations couldn't wait to try it out. And the difference in her performance was so dramatic she couldn't wait to give her report the next month. By staying focused on your audience, the 20-minute plan doesn't just save time – it eliminates pain.