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ONE ESSENTIAL QUESTION TO ASK YOURSELF, BEFORE WRITING A PRESENTATION by Paula Lyons

If you're like most people, you'd rather clean out your junk drawer and alphabetize the books on your shelf than prepare that presentation that's scheduled in three weeks.

"How do I begin?" many of our clients ask.

If you've taken a presentation class, or read a book about presentations, you know the cardinal rule: it's never about you – it's about your audience.

That's helpful – but there are a lot of facts about your audience that may not help you clarify your concept. What if you had one question that would jumpstart your thinking and get your presentation in focus?

It turns out – there is one.

We learned this from a guy named Chris Pavek. Chris works internally as an executive coach with the Analysis Group which provides economic, business and financial strategies to corporate clients and law firms. Chris said the first question he asks every individual or group preparing a presentation is this:

"What do you want them to believe, after you speak?"

"It's very effective because it startles people," Pavek says. "It goes deeper than what do you want them to get or do. It has emotional resonance and gets them to think." In fact, says Pavek, this question ends up driving the entire presentation and making it purposeful.

"When you talk about beliefs, you are talking about what really matters to people," Pavek added. "Take away" has become business jargon. Beliefs are stronger. People remember beliefs."

Of course to figure out what you want people to believe, and sell it, you also have to believe it yourself. You have to believe in yourself, your product, your service and convey it with passion.

That point was driven home recently, as I coached an executive in the financial services industry, who was trying to sell a particular investment strategy to prospective clients.

This is a woman who normally is quite effective presenting. But on this day, her content was dull and disorganized. Her tone and body language lacked enthusiasm and conviction. “What’s wrong?” I asked. It took a while, but eventually she admitted what her body language had already told me...she had lost faith in that strategy. It hadn’t been performing well.

Audiences know when you don’t believe what you’re saying. They have radar. They pick up conflicting signals and pay attention. So what you say has to be closely tied to the truth of what you believe. You must be authentic.

“What’s authentic is what you really believe,” says John Hamill, chairman and CEO of Sovereign Bank in New England, in ***Speak Like a CEO*** by Suzanne Bates. “I think what works is when you are excited about what you are saying,” Hamill adds. “It isn’t just the idea, but the emotion behind the idea that makes you successful.”

Want to know how well it works?

Three researchers who provide scientific testimony were preparing a mock deposition to show potential clients their capabilities. I had started incorporating Chris Pavek’s approach in our coaching. So, I asked those researchers the question, “What do you want them to believe?”

“I want them to believe that we are articulate and able to explain complex theory to a jury in a way they can completely understand,” said the group leader.

That was a good start. But as we prepared the presentation, they arrived at a sticky point. Complex slides that didn’t really tell a story. The leader of the group said, “Oh, usually people don’t get these slides so we just skip them.”

“Stop right there,” I said. “If you can’t articulate this complex idea to potential clients, how are they going to believe you can give expert testimony? The whole idea is that you must be able to explain complex ideas simply. That’s what you are selling!”

The group agreed and went to work on an analogy everyone could understand – they succeeded in explaining a very complicated process. The presentation was a huge success.

I don’t think I could have persuaded them to do that, if I hadn’t insisted they articulate what they wanted that audience to believe.

Here are some action steps, before you begin preparing your next presentation:

- Ask yourself what you want people to believe.
- Write that down and make it part of your presentation
- You may even want to consider saying in your presentation, “What I want you to believe when this meeting ends is ”