How to Be Better Prepared for Your Next Major Presentation

“Hi. My name is Michael, and I’m a prepaholic.” If there was a support group for people who over-prepare, I would be a charter member.

In my prior role as a CEO, much of my job involved making presentations—to boards, banks, investors, authors, agents, customers, employees, vendors, the media—you name it. Now, as a professional speaker, it represents most of my life. Each one of these engagements is an opportunity to connect with the audience and make a good “brand impression—or a bad one.

I’m not sure where I learned to prepare for these meetings. I’m sure much of it comes from my desire to exceed people’s expectations or perhaps, negatively, out of a fear of being embarrassed. Regardless, it drives me to prepare relentlessly.

Recently, I had a big presentation in New York. The night before, I was talking with my oldest daughter. When I told her how much time I had spent preparing she laughed. “Dad, you so over-prepare. You always do a great job. Why don’t you just relax and learn to trust that.”

I thought for a minute and then replied, “The reason I do a good job is because I prepare. I don’t believe in ‘winging it’.”

As I’ve thought about it, I think there are seven levels to preparation. Most people focus exclusively on the first level. In fact, few people get beyond this level. But if you want to be a better presenter, you have to get better at preparation. I don’t know of any shortcuts.

1. **Prepare the Presentation.** Though this is probably the most time consuming part, it is the easiest. Everyone does this to one degree or another. But the key to doing it well is to determine at the outset exactly what you want people to take away.

   So many presentations are really just random collections of bulleted lists. (Sadly, this is the dark side of presentation software like PowerPoint.) There’s no story-line. There’s no flow. There’s not even an argument.

   No wonder people listening to these kinds of presentations daydream, check their smart phone, or nod off. The presenter tries to communicate *everything* and ends up communicating *nothing*.

   Instead, I use the SCORRE method (which we teach at [The SCORRE Conference](http://michaelhyatt.com)) to decide on my *objective statement*. I then create the outline or rationale.
For example, in my speech last week, the sponsor wanted me to speak on “How to Shave Ten Hours Off Your Work Week.” My objective statement was:

Everyone can shave at least ten hours off their work week by implementing these seven strategies.

This sets up an enabling speech (as opposed to a persuasive speech) that explains how to to something—in this case reducing your workload.

Once I had the objective statement, all I needed to do was “unpack” it and expound on the seven strategies. These became my outline:

- Strategy 1: Limit your time online.
- Strategy 2: Touch emails once—and only once.
- Strategy 3: Implement the two-minute rule.
- Strategy 4: Triage your calendar.
- Strategy 5: Schedule time in the “alone zone.”
- Strategy 6: Practice the art of non-finishing.
- Strategy 7: Engage in a weekly review process.

I started by playing the famous “Let ‘Er Roll” episode from I Love Lucy. I then stated a version of my objective statement and worked through my outline. Simple, straightforward, and effective.

2. Prepare the Setting. The presentation setting will either enhance or detract from your presentation. The setting is to a presentation what a stage or a set is to a theater production. When you can control it, you need to think through the details. For example:

- What AV equipment will you use?
- Will it accommodate your specific computer?
- Will you use a remote slide controller or will you just use the computer’s space bar?
- Will the projector be bright enough for the room and the lighting?
- Will there be a stage, a board-room table, or a small conference room?
- How should the chairs be arranged?
- Will you stand-up or sit down?

These are just a few of the literally scores of questions you should—and must—ask. As someone once said, “love is in the details.” The more you can control these seemingly little variables, the more likely your presentation will have the impact you desire.

But what happens when you can’t control the setting? Then you need to do the best you can with what you have. My own preference is to opt for the setting that gives me the most control.

For example, in last week’s presentation, I was on unfamiliar turf. I was in someone else’s space. That’s why I always have a pre-conference call to discuss with the sponsor what I will need to make the best possible presentation. This by itself heads off 95% of all the problems I used to encounter.
As it turned out, we couldn’t get the audio to work. However, we were able to quickly work out a solution and try it before the audience arrived.

3. **Prepare the Audience.** This begins by discovering what the audience expects. If you don’t know, try to do some research before the meeting. I ask the meeting’s organizer or sponsor exactly what they hope to accomplish.

Several years ago, I brought John Maxwell, one of our authors, in to speak to our employees. John is the consummate communicator. He is also relentless about preparing.

The first thing he said was this: “Mike, I know this is an important meeting for you. What would it take for me to hit the ball out of the park? How would you describe the best outcome you could imagine?”

I said, “I want people leaving the meeting believing they can accomplish something heroic.”

He replied, “Got it.” And, he did. He totally delivered. But it began by taking the time to understand what I wanted to accomplish. I try to do this in my pre-conference calls.

Part of preparing the audience also involves setting their expectations. You can do this in the meeting invitation, the agenda, or just a brief here’s-why-we’re-here statement at the beginning of the meeting.

Also, if it’s a board meeting or other political situation, it is also helpful to “pre-sell” your project to key stakeholders before you get in a room, present your idea, and have the tide turn against you. I have learned this the hard way. If you prep a few key players and make sure you have their support, they can actually help you do the selling in the meeting.

4. **Prepare Yourself.** I don’t know about you, but I have to do serious mental preparation before every presentation. When I first started out making presentations, I was scared to death. I would literally shake. I had cold, sweaty hands and a dry mouth. I would sometimes go into the restroom before I spoke and rub my hands together hard just to get them to warm up! I was embarrassed to shake anyone’s hand.

Gratefully, that has worn off over the years. Speaking has become much less stressful. But it still creates some anxiety. A couple of things have helped me:

- Get a good night’s sleep the night before and important speech or meeting.
- Don’t schedule anything before the meeting. I get very focused before I speak, and I literally can’t think about anything else.
- Watch my nutrition. Don’t drink too much caffeine or eat too many high glycemic carbs. These disturb my blood chemistry and can make me light-headed or hyper.
- Get in a quiet place and **rehearse my speech**, on my feet, out loud.
- Close my eyes and consciously relax all my major muscle groups.
5. **Prepare the Collateral Material.** Generally, I don’t like handouts. I especially don’t like to provide a printed copy of my presentation deck. I think it’s a distraction. I hate to see people flipping ahead and not paying attention to what I am saying.

Part of this is that I have a theory about presentations. It’s this: *I am the presenter.* Not the slideshow and not the handouts. Those things are there to enhance or augment what I have to say. I never give them center stage.

If I am going to handout notes, I like to tell people upfront. Sometimes people can get frustrated trying to write down everything you are saying or showing on your slides. People learn best when they are relaxed and caught up in the moment. You want as few distractions as possible.

If the meeting is really important, pay attention to how the handouts are formatted and packaged. Several times I have spent thousands of dollars to design the “killer proposal.” These were always when the stakes were high, and I really wanted to “wow” the prospect. Almost always, this was a good investment. My philosophy is “play to win” or as a friend of mine says, “go big or go home.”

For many presentations, you can spend a few hundred dollars and get something really impressive. Or, as an alternative, scour the Web and find the right template. There are scores of sites that specialize in providing just these kinds of tools.

6. **Prepare for Questions.** Many of my presentations are followed by a Q&A session. I do pretty good on my feet, but if the meeting is important, I like to write out every question and objection I can think of and then write an answer or a set of “talking points.”

When my first book was published, I did more than a thousand radio and television interviews. I got lots of practice answering questions. But I’ll never forget my first radio interview. By that time, I had grown accustomed to public speaking, but I had never done a live radio interview. Once again, I was terrified.

Before the interview, I prepared a “briefing book.” I spent days writing out every question and every objection I could think of. Then I categorized them by topic, printed them out, and put them in a notebook with tab dividers.

Whenever I was asked a question, I would simply flip to the tab and start reciting the relevant talking points and statistics. It looked like I had mastered the material but it was really all about preparing the material and knowing how to get to it when I needed it.

When Thomas Nelson was a public company, and I had just become the new CEO, I had to lead our quarterly conference call with institutional investors and analysts. I usually had key members of my team present.
Several days before the call, I would have them think of all the questions we might get asked. Then I would assign them out to the appropriate person to research. During the call, when a question would come up, I would point to the executive who had prepared for that question. It was very effective, and we always looked like we were on top of our business.

7. **Prepare for Next Time.** The best time to prepare for the next meeting is right after the last one. You should do this when everything is still fresh in your memory. At the very least, I always try to jot down as many notes as I can. I consider this a sort of personal debriefing session. I ask, *Okay. What worked? What do I want to make sure I do again? What didn’t work so well? What do I want to make sure that I don’t do again?*

The best way to do this is to ask the people closest to you for their candid assessment. You have to give people permission to be honest. Make it safe—don’t be defensive. Otherwise, they will just tell you you were great and you will never improve.

Instead, you want honest, specific feedback. You don’t have to act on every suggestion but you need to carefully consider every suggestion. You need to also thank people for their feedback and affirm how helpful it is to you. If you do so, people will get bolder about sharing it, which is exactly what you want.

I can always count on my wife, Gail, to shoot straight. She gives me the “good, the bad, and the ugly.” Unfortunately, she can’t be at every presentation I give. So I have to count on my others to tell me the truth.

My manager also sends a survey to even event sponsor, so we get their candid feedback. I want to know how I can improve!

So, those are the seven levels of preparation. If you want to become an excellent presenter, you have to move past the first one and take control of all seven. This is best way to ensure that your presentation makes the impact you desire.