

# Presenting to

**This communications expert outlines a straightforward approach to making effective presentations**

*by Brigid McHugh Sanner*

*Providing orientations to new members or residents. Addressing community groups. Presenting an overview of your program to potential funders. Speaking at a conference or meeting.* In your role as a fitness, health or wellness professional, you probably encounter numerous opportunities to make both formal and informal presentations. The following commonsense pointers can help you improve your effectiveness as a speaker—especially if your primary audience groups include older adults.

# 50-plus audiences: a practical guide

## First things first

Whether asked to make a five-minute introduction, direct a three-hour workshop, or give a formal speech to a community group, take time to organize your thoughts.

Start by setting objectives that define exactly what you expect to accomplish because of your presentation. Next, outline the specific topic areas you will need to cover to accomplish these objectives. Take into account the amount of time you have for your presentation, then structure your talk based on how much time you will allocate to each key topic. Be sure to allow for a question-and-answer segment, if appropriate.

As you prepare and deliver your presentation, keep your audience in mind. Consider your objectives and topics from the audience's perspective, and strive to frame your messages to fit this group's interests and backgrounds. Say you're talking about the importance of a fitness program that combines endurance, strength, stretching and balance. If your audience is primarily people ages 65–75 years, you should address the benefits of these activities in terms relevant to this age group, i.e. the role of physical activity in maintaining independence, managing arthritis, or enabling people to play with their grandchildren.

Use your words to create positive images that connect with your audience. Marketing research by AARP, a national nonprofit organization that serves age 50-plus adults, tells us that imagery and tone are crucial in motivating people to be physically active. Images of people they can relate to encourage individuals in this age group.

Use examples that feature active older men and women, and include illustrations of activities that people with physical limitations can do. But

avoid emphasizing elite senior athletes, as this may discourage or overwhelm your audience. Finally, stay away from the *no pain, no gain* message. Research shows this message is ineffective at motivating midlife and older adults to exercise, as is the confrontational or critical *get off the couch* approach.

If you cover technical or medical concepts in your talk, bear in mind a lay audience may be unfamiliar with some terms or phrases you use every day.

“When I speak to *non-expert* audiences, I try to use a lot of synonyms, so that I link a technical term like *cardiovascular* to a more readily understandable term like *stamina*,” says Wojtek Chodzko-Zajko, Ph.D. This active aging expert heads the Department of Kinesiology, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, and directs the National Blueprint Office: Increasing Physical Activity for Adults Age 50 and Older. Chodzko-Zajko says he tries to use both the technical term and the lay language at the same time. “I deliberately try to demystify the science jargon by translating it into concepts the audience will understand,” he adds.

Personalize your talk with examples from your own experiences, suggests Marcia G. Ory, Ph.D., director of the Active for Life® National Program Office at the Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health. “When I talk to older audiences, I talk about my 88 year-old mother, Esther, and everyone loves it,” says Ory. “They can relate to her, and then they begin to feel like I can understand them.”

## Setting the stage

Allow yourself time to become familiar with your speaking location before your presentation. Arrive at the venue early to check things and to get comfortable with the space:

- Test any audiovisual (AV) equipment you will use. Walk around the room to get a sense of what things will look and sound like from the far sides and the back.
- Check whether people will be able to see and hear you clearly. If possible, move the chairs or tables around to enhance visibility and sound for your audience.
- Find the light dimmers or switches. If you use AV for a daytime presentation, ensure you can dim the room sufficiently for your PowerPoint or video to be viewed easily.
- Get a glass of water and keep it handy in case you need it while speaking.
- Try any microphone you plan to use. A microphone fixed to a lectern may need to be adjusted to your height. Experiment with a handheld or a lavalier model, so you know how far to place the microphone from your mouth. (A lavalier attaches to your shirt or jacket by a small clip.)

With a handheld or lavalier microphone, you must take care to avoid moving too close to any fixed *live* microphone in the room, or you risk *feedback* from the electronic system. This high, shrill sound annoys any audience. But this noise can be especially uncomfortable for older people, particularly those who wear hearing aids.

## Be attentive to sound issues

Hearing loss is one of the most common conditions affecting older adults, notes William C. Shiel, M.D., in his editorial review “Hearing Loss and Older Adults.” In fact, hearing loss affects one in three people older than 60 years of age and half those older than 85. These problems can make it hard for someone to understand and follow a presentation, hear videos or audiotapes, or understand questions asked by other audience members. You do not need to

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shout to accommodate people's hearing loss. But you *must* speak clearly and slowly. In addition, stand where the audience can easily see your face, as many people will understand you better if they can see your expressions.

At the beginning of your presentation, ask people to raise their hands **if they can hear you**. Note any hands **not raised**, and adjust your volume and speaking pace accordingly.

Repeat any questions you take from the audience. This practice serves two purposes:

- It ensures others hear the question, because in most cases you will repeat the question louder than the person asking it; and
- It clarifies your understanding of the query.

Background sounds also make it difficult for people to hear you. Examples include noise from fitness equipment being operated outside the

room in which you are speaking, nearby music, or even dishes and silverware clinking during a luncheon or dinner presentation. With an older audience, your awareness of sound issues is critical, as is your understanding of visual challenges.

## **Visual impact**

One in six Americans ages 45 or older (or 16.5 million people) report some form of vision impairment, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, according to Lighthouse International, a global not-for-profit resource on vision impairment and rehabilitation. The prevalence of vision loss also increases with age. By age 75, one in four people will have impaired vision.

When using visual aids, you can help the audience see your materials better by following these practical guidelines:

- When using PowerPoint or slides, keep the graphics simple and use a high-contrast design, e.g. white or light yellow letters on a dark blue or black background. This light-on-dark combination is easier to see on a projection screen than pastel colors on a medium-hued background or dark letters on a light background.
- Put no more than seven lines of copy on a slide. The point of slides is to aid understanding and emphasize key points, not to serve as a script for your talk, so keep copy brief.
- When including photographs or drawings, select those relevant to the audience.
- Generally speaking, overhead transparencies are difficult to see, and the advent of PowerPoint makes these tools somewhat outdated.
- When using a flip chart, use a black or dark blue marker in good condition and print in clear, large letters to ensure people in the back can see what you write.
- Posters or other printed materials may

create a reflective glare when held up to the audience. This is especially true when materials are laminated or printed on glossy paper. To accommodate for glare, move the horizontal and vertical angle of the piece as you show it to the audience.

- Avoid completely dimming the lights during your presentation. The majority of today's LCD (PowerPoint) projectors do not require a darkened room. Keeping the light on allows your audience to take notes, and enables them to maintain better visual contact with you throughout your presentation.

## **Watch those nonverbals**

Your dress, grooming, facial expressions and body language contribute significantly to your effectiveness as a communicator. "Contrary to intuition, the brunt of the impact of a speaker's presentation is through nonverbal communication," says Patricia Hogan Hamm, Ph.D., former graduate fellow with Brown University's Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning.

It's estimated that audiences derive meaning from about one-third verbal reception and two-thirds nonverbal reception, states Hogan Hamm. "When the verbal and nonverbal messages are contradictory, most people will believe the nonverbal message they are receiving, not the verbal one," she adds. "Hence, the nonverbal messages, conscious or unconscious, that are being sent by the speaker through appearance, attitude, gesture and dress, are crucial to the communication of ideas."

Your clothes are usually one of the first things people notice about you—and what you wear can communicate intended as well as unintended messages. "When you're in front of a group giving a presentation, making a speech or just plain talking, you need to

choose your attire to match the event,” advises Executive Communications Group (ECG), a New Jersey firm specializing in public speaking and presentation skills training. “For example, you will typically want to dress one notch of formality above your audience. That means if they’re wearing slacks and shirts or blouses, you may want to add a sports jacket to your ensemble,” continues ECG. “On the other hand, wearing a suit and tie in front of an audience in jeans and T-shirts is rarely a good idea.”

Furthermore, presenters need to be able to *move* in their clothes. “Narrow skirts, tight pants or form-fitting jackets restrict movement,” states ECG. “To capitalize on large body gestures, be sure your clothes are tailored so you can move.”

Paying attention to the following details is also essential to conveying a professional image:

- Ensure clothes are neatly pressed, clean and in good repair.
- Polish shoes.
- Keep hair neat, trimmed, out of the eyes and pulled back from the face.
- Choose accessories to complement your outfit and add interest; avoid flashy, highly reflective or distracting items.
- Especially for women: wear natural makeup, as a general rule, but apply a slightly brighter shade of lipstick and a bit more blush than normal when speaking before a large group in a large room. Lipstick is suggested for women as it brightens and draws attention to the face.
- Especially for men: consider applying face powder in a neutral shade to tone down shine from bald spots for presentations in formal settings, but, on the whole, skip the makeup for standard presentation settings.

A subtle, classy appearance is generally a good bet when addressing an older audience. This look communicates organization, respect, credibility, competence and professionalism.

Other elements of nonverbal communication include facial expressions, posture, eye contact, movement and gestures:

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- Keep facial expressions relaxed. Look at yourself in the mirror while practicing your remarks. And remember to smile often.
- Check your posture. When standing, your feet should be placed squarely on the ground at hip width, shoulders over hips, neck muscles relaxed, head held high and back straight. This posture enables you to move, gesture and pick up materials gracefully. Do not shift your weight from one foot to the other while speaking, as this gives you an unbalanced appearance and can detract from your image of authority and control. And avoid leaning on the lectern—its purpose is to hold your notes and a glass of water, not to prop you up.
- Make eye contact with individuals in the audience, not by sweeping your

gaze across the crowd, but by looking at individuals for at least three seconds. Try to finish a thought or sentence before moving your focus to another person. Ensure you establish eye contact with people in all parts of the room—front, back, middle and sides.

- Use movement to convey energy, excitement and sparkle. Move decisively and with confidence. During your talk, stroll away from the podium the way you would walk in your home. Always take at least two or three steps—one step makes you look hesitant. Strive to convey freedom, relaxation and ease in your movements.
- Use gestures that are natural, but somewhat bigger than normal, especially when speaking before a

large crowd. Your physical gestures need to carry to the back of the room. Avoid small gestures, which may convey timidity; crossing your arms, which creates a barrier between you and your audience; and nervous mannerisms, such as tapping a pencil, playing with a piece of jewelry or adjusting an article of clothing.

## Engage your audience

Drs. Chodzko-Zajko and Ory emphasize the importance of engaging your audience, especially when addressing older people. “I am not aware of deliberately changing my presentation content for older adult audiences, but I always change my delivery style—my rate and volume,” says Chodzko-Zajko. “I deliberately make eye contact and try to get

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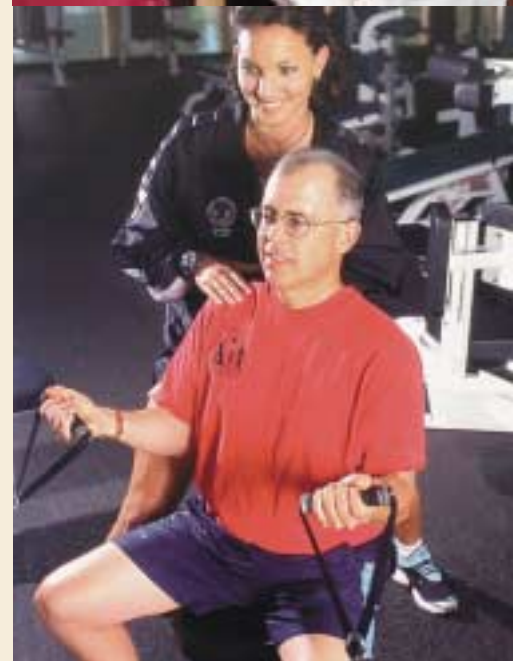
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feedback from the reactions of the audience,” he states. “If they seem to not understand, I will go back and repeat, using different words and examples.”

Ory concurs with Chodzko-Zajko. “It’s important to give the audience a chance to participate,” she adds. “People like to be interactive, rather than be talked to.”

Your presentations should be enjoyable experiences for you and your audience. You have something informative, interesting and important to communicate, and your audience wants to hear you. So be prepared, be relaxed, be engaging, and you’ll be a marvelous communicator. ▼

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## Preparing presentations: some good resources

Executive Communications Group  
<http://ecglink.com>  
Resources, training and practical communications tips are available on this website.

Kansas University Medical Center  
*Effective Presentations On-line Tutorial Series*  
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