

How to Present Information to Your Board

A handful of Valium isn't the answer. Instead, follow these five steps.

BY BILL J. HARRISON, CFRE

The experience has been described as more terrifying than entering a lion's den, more painful than the inquisitor's thumb-screw, and hotter than July in Arizona—but making a presentation to your board of directors doesn't have to be difficult or frightening. With preparation and enthusiasm, you can make a professional impression, achieve desired goals, and help your board become better informed and motivated.

To make your next presentation to your governing board a rousing success, follow these simple steps:

1

Plan your presentation well in advance.

Boards meet on a regularly scheduled basis. If you know you're expected to make a 30-minute presentation a month from now, begin thinking and planning today. Ask yourself these questions:

- **What's the goal** of the presentation? Do you want the board to take action? Approve expenditures? Volunteer for a specific task?
- **What kind**, and how much statistical data should you present?
- **Are there new board members** who aren't familiar with the material you're presenting?

- **How technical** should the information be?
- **Who on the board** will support what you have to say? Who will oppose?
- **What's the most logical way** of presenting the information to elicit the response you need?

Once you've answered these questions, developing an outline for your presentation becomes more clearly defined.

2

Use handouts and audio-visual aids with care.

Handouts and audio-visual aids can enhance your presentation—but don't allow them to detract. The board members are listening to you; don't distract and confuse them with reams of paper and non-essential graphics. When you distribute information to the board before you speak, they may be reading it and not listening to you. Handouts should be a part of the board "book" or made available following your presentation. Audio-visual materials should be designed with visually exciting colors and shapes. Written information, projected onto a screen, should be large enough to be easily read from the back of the room. Avoid graphs with hazy lines, charts with hundreds of numbers, and tiny printing that's impossible to decipher. If you're going to use audio-visual equipment, make sure you know how it operates. Nothing ruins the continuity of a presentation quicker than trying to clear a jammed slide projector, fumbling with a backward overhead chart, or cussing a temperamental videotape player.



A question-and-answer period is essential.

3

Practice your presentation.

The time you devote to practice will be rewarded by increased board involvement, enthusiastic and motivated members, and better attendance at meetings. When you rehearse your presentation, you'll be able to expand on important ideas and cut away unnecessary fluff. You'll discover weaknesses in your material, identify ambiguous statements, and eliminate inappropriate technical jargon. Practice will also help you time your presentation to conform to the board's tight schedule. Most important, practice will build your confidence. Take the time at home, or in your office, to prepare. Talk it through several times; listen to how it sounds. The more times you go over the presentation, the stronger it will become.

4

Ask for questions.

A question-and-answer period after your presentation is essential. Prepare beforehand for board member questions. Ask your spouse, another staff person, or a business associate to pose questions regarding your presentation. A word of warning: If you honestly don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to find out the answer as soon as possible. Don't try to bluff your way through answers. It's unprofessional, and you may do yourself more harm than good.

5

Use enthusiasm, humor, and a smile.

Presenting information to the board doesn't have to be the emotional equivalent of a firing squad; it's more closely related to the excitement of opening night jitters. No matter how much you prepare, there will be those fluttering butterflies annoying your stomach. Neutralize those feelings by showing enthusiasm for your subject. Stand up straight, use eye contact, speak loud enough for everyone to hear, smile at the members of the board, and if possible use humor in your program. Anecdotes, amusing personal experiences, and related jokes can all add to the rich fabric of your presentation.

Don't be intimidated by the community leaders serving on your board. They're there to help your organization, they believe in your cause, and they want you to be successful in your efforts. You're all on the same team, so prepare and practice for your presentation like it was for the big game. You'll be a winner every time.

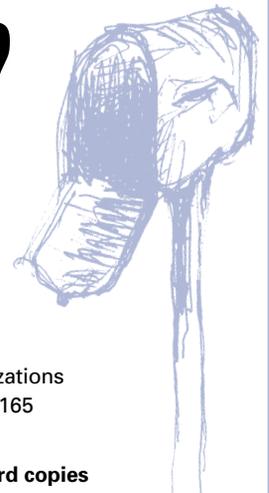
Resources

- Brudney, Jeffrey & Vic Murray, "Improving Nonprofit Boards: What Works & What Doesn't?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 3.
- Eadie, Douglas, "Boards Can't Go It Alone: Forging a Partnership with the Executive Director," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 2.
- Michalko, Michael, "Seven Creative Ways to Energize Your Board," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 3.
- Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Board Leadership & Governance, Leadership Series*.
- Weisman, Carol, *Board Governance Videotape*.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

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