

LAW FIRM ADMINISTRATION A Special Report

Presentations That Work

Getting the top dogs to pay attention means making it short and to the point.



BY MARSHA REDMON

More and more, law firm administrators are required to make important presentations to firm management. Whether you're presenting associate recruiting results or tying attorney training costs into overall firm objectives, making formal presentations to the executive committee can be nerve-racking.

Imagine this: You're standing in your firm's most formal conference room in front of the executive committee. Your PowerPoint show is locked and loaded. You take a deep breath and begin. In the middle of your first sentence, the managing partner interrupts and says, "Let's save some time here. Tell us the ROI for our industry-focused marketing push." You gulp. That number is somewhere in the middle of your 26 slides, and you can't quite remember the answer. Or how it was calculated. You now realize the folly of relying on your PowerPoint slides for the answers.

Presenting to executives doesn't have to be painful or intimidating. Here are several techniques that will help make your appearance before the management committee more comfortable and productive.

INSIDE SCOOP

There are two things you must find out before you plan your presentation: exactly what content they want covered and how they like it presented, including what they hate. First find out exactly what they

want to know, to what level of specificity, and what they want left out. Check your understanding with several people to be sure you're covering what all of them want to know.

Next, discover the style they prefer for presentations, the how. For example, they may detest PowerPoint, viewing it as a prop for bad presenters. Talk to the managing partner's assistant—she will know how the management committee likes presentations to be done, what they hate, and who they think is a bad presenter and why.

If you think this is a waste of time, consider the Fortune 50 company that, long after PowerPoint was commonly used, still preferred overhead projectors and considered anyone who used PowerPoint to be an outsider. Or the Fortune 100 CEO who always flipped to the back page of handouts to see the bottom-line numbers. Wouldn't you like to be the smart administrator who noticed that and put her bottom-line number on the front page! Other good sources for an inside scoop are other managers who have presented to the group before. They'll know what works and what doesn't.

I have first-hand experience of the benefits of an inside scoop from my first year of law school. My street-smart study partner spent time talking to the top third-year students who had our professors when they were first-years. The scoop was that our torts professor gave points every time you indented a paragraph on the handwritten essay exams. It sounded crazy, but we tried it anyway. We aced

torts! Inside scoops plus preparation is a winning strategy every time.

SHORT AND SWEET

All executives, including law firm leaders, are very busy people who sometimes have the attention span of a gnat. The best way to get their attention and keep it is to get to the bottom line quickly and know when to stop talking. You'll earn their respect if you do this consistently.

The best approach is to limit your speech to two points. You're thinking, "But I have so much more to say!" Yes, and if you say it *all*, they won't remember any of it. Pick the two things you want them to remember. Focus on those points. Make them ask for details on everything else.

Remember the State of the Union address last month? Can you still remember the president's three points? They were homeland defense, end the war, and fix the economy. I remember them because there were only three and they were simple.

Short is crucial for PowerPoint. Remember the famous Billboard Rule: Don't put more on a slide than you could read if it were printed on a billboard and you were driving by at 40 miles per hour in your car.

ORGANIZED BUT FLEXIBLE

In your own department, you can insist on rigid organization and hierarchy if you want to. But rigidity and control won't work when presenting to the management team. You have to go with their flow. Don't fight them when they interrupt you to skip to the end

of your presentation. Don't tell them you'll address that point in a minute. You must be flexible and respond to them in the moment. With simple organization and structure, you can do that easily.

Here's how: Take your two points and create a bottom-line statement for each point. Always state your bottom line up front. Then develop support for your statement by gathering your two best facts or statistics. Finally, illustrate your point with an anecdote, analogy, case study, or client story.

My favorite illustration is from politics. Sen. Tom Daschle's now-famous description of the Republican tax cut proposal was, "If you make over \$300,000 this year, this tax cut means you get to buy a new Lexus. If you make \$50,000 a year, you get to buy a new muffler on your used car." In two sentences, he illustrated in a straightforward, visual way his opinion of the effect of the tax cut. He took a huge number that had no meaning to the average person and brought it down to terms anyone could grasp without having to think.

The beauty of simple organization is twofold: it's easy to understand and remember, for both the listener and the speaker. If your executive team is the kind of audience that keeps interrupting with questions, your simple organization—two points, each with two supporting facts and one illustration—will not desert you. And if you have mastered your two points, you will feel far more comfortable and confident than if you tried to cover the whole waterfront.

ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS

Prepare for questions as if you're on trial—because you are. Remember that

people are more interested in the answer to their question than anything else you have to say. As a former reporter who covered many press conferences, take my word for it. I believed my question was the best one and everything else was a kind of noise, like the voice of the teacher in Charlie Brown cartoons. Executives are like reporters in this regard.

Learn to see questions as helpful. They are a clue to what interests your audience. To prepare for questions, gather your team together and write down all of the questions you could be asked. Organize the questions into three categories: good, neutral, and bad. Good questions will lead you to your two main points. Neutral questions neither help nor hurt you and should be answered quickly to avoid wasting time. Bad questions lead to dead-end issues or raise controversy. Practice answering them honestly, but don't say too much or you could sound defensive.

RESPOND TO BODY LANGUAGE

This is the most important technique you will ever perfect. The key to dealing with executives of every kind—from managing partners to CEOs—is to notice and respond immediately to what their body language tells you. If you notice them squirming and looking around the room, make a change immediately. Change the topic or change your tactic. If you've been on one topic for a few minutes and they look bored, move on—even if you have four more slides and some nifty numbers.

Another option is to direct a question to the person who seems most bored. For example, "John, what's your take on the summer event I'm proposing?" The fastest way to get the attention of a passive listener is to call his name. It gets the

adrenaline flowing and forces the person to come back to the present. The others will perk up, too. If you're near the beginning and can feel you're losing some of the group, ask them, "Is this making sense to you? Are you with me?"

One good way to switch gears and grab their attention is to tell a story that illustrates one of your two main points. Another option is to walk up to the white board or flip chart and write down one number. Then describe what that bottom-line number means to the firm. You may also ask the group to redirect you to a topic they want to hear about by saying, "I have a few minutes left, what would you like me to cover before I summarize?" The thought that the speaker is almost finished always energizes a group and pulls them back to the present.

I SOAR

You may have noticed that the first letters of these tips spell out the mnemonic "I soar," which is what you will do if you incorporate this advice when presenting to your executive committee. When you can capture and hold the interest of your executive audience, it's much more likely they will understand and remember your message. And becoming known as a strong presenter will certainly enhance your reputation as an effective administrator.

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