

A New Look At Presentations

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Why do we give presentations? What is the thinking behind them? And, how successful are they?

Historically, presentations are geared to offering information in a way that will offer a viewer product information that will whet their appetite. Conventionally, they are used to influence thinking – to get people to buy something (an idea or a product), or to get people to learn something new.

The belief behind them has been that if the information is offered in an easy-to-read, easy-to-understand way, that the presenter will be successful. In other words, present it and they will get it.

I'm here to suggest that people do not change their minds, make a purchasing decision, or even adopt new learning because they are presented with attractive visuals. For some reason, the belief has prevailed that supplying information will influence someone's thinking. Sellers, trainers, project leaders, speakers, all use presentations to help influence opinions and decisions.

INFORMATION DOES NOT CHANGE MINDS

For some reason, we have a tendency to believe that information changes minds. I'm here to tell you that it's not true.

As an experiment with a man (John) who did not believe this, I told him I wanted to tell him about this fabulous sports jacket he might have interest in purchasing. Obviously a clothes horse, this man wore all beige clothing – not to mention cashmere and silk and wool. Quite a bon vivant, actually. He was delighted to sit and listen to me pitch.

I told him of this polyester jacket of purple and yellow stripes with a bit of lime green splattered around at odd points in the material. Oh, it was made well, and the stitching was done by hand. It was a one-of-a-kind, and.... Before I got very far into my pitch, he stopped me. Great, he said, but more data wasn't necessary. That wasn't the type of jacket he'd be interest in.

'Oh?' I said. "You've got criteria?"

He smiled, and said that he did, and that "appropriate" information would teach him how to choose one jacket over another.

I changed the subject just a bit: "What are your criteria around donating to charities?" I asked.

"I only donate to charities that will directly support youth in my neighborhood. But what does that have to do with jackets?"

"What would a jacket need to look like if purchasing the jacket would meet your donating criteria?"

“I don’t know. That scenario has never come up. I guess I would purchase the jacket no matter what it looked like, if it truly met my criteria.”

I then told him about this group of teens who were living under a bridge in his home town – teens that had been part of a gang, most of whom had been killed in a gang shoot-out. They had been thrown out of their family homes, and were living in cardboard boxes under a bridge. As a way to help these kids earn money, someone had given them a bolt of cloth. They made jackets to sell, and with the money they made they were going to rent a house so they’d have a roof over their heads.

John asked me how many jackets were available for sale. He bought them all – not because of the jackets, but because the story of the boys met his criteria around donating to neighborhood projects.

THE SET UP IN PRESENTATIONS

Let’s stop here for a moment and peruse the presentation scenario: a vendor comes to a prospect’s site to introduce new material. He enters the room that contains folks he’s spoken with on the phone – except for that unknown person who he’s just being introduced to. He smiles, assuming that this new person is somehow a part of the decision team, and continues on. He introduces himself, his company, his product, and launches (after a few pleasantries) into his presentation. He knows it well, and even stops occasionally to ensure that the product is timely and appropriate for the prospect. At the end, he asks if there are questions. There are some interesting questions that give the seller the understanding that he’s done a fine job. Obviously the prospect has interest. Indeed they are quite excited about the product and how it could be used in the company. He leaves after getting next steps sewn up, and he gives himself an 80% factor on making the sale.

And then he never hears from the group again.

What went wrong? The presentation was fabulous, the people were interested, everyone recognized how cogent and necessary the product was...

Here are the beeping red lights for me:

1. just who was that strange person in the group (and there is always at least one person who just ‘shows up’ for a presentation)? How was he ‘related’ to the others? What sort of influence did he have over the decision? What was his role in the decision team? Or was he a beloved vendor who is in competition with you?
2. the entire interaction was based on the belief that if the seller could present effectively, if the product was appropriate to the prospect’s need, or if the product would answer some of the problems associated with the prospect’s business initiatives, they would know they were supposed to buy it.
3. that giving a great presentation meant that the buyer would know how to align and manage internal management and process variables in a timely way so they would be prepared to purchase it.
4. that other, current, vendors used by the prospects weren’t capable of offering what the seller was presenting, and that the interest wasn’t going to

be used to help the current vendor get their act together.

5. that the internal team that usually supplied the fix that the seller's product would support would not be able to use the seller's data to create the fix on their own – even inadequately.

Sellers enter prospects environments assuming that if the prospect has a need, if the sellers pitch well, if the product is good, and if the presentation material is great, that the buyer will buy.

CRITERIA VS INFORMATION

But the above is specious thinking. It's just not true.

When you use a presentation to introduce a product or an idea that you want others to act upon, you are making the following assumptions:

1. that you have prepared so thoroughly that the listener needs and wants the specific set of information topics you are presenting;
2. that the style you are using to present is the exact style needed by the listener in order to be able to use and apply the information;
3. that the listener knows how to align his internal goals, systems needs, partner issues, and general systems criteria around your data;
4. that the listener knows what to do with the material in terms of their current solution;
5. that the listener knows how to line up all of her collaboration partners around the material and can teach them how to make a decision around it.

In other words, giving information is like throwing spaghetti on the wall: you have no idea what will stick until after you've thrown it, and by then it's already too late.

People do not decide based on data. They decide based on criteria – their values, beliefs, history, initiatives, hopes, fears, collaborations, relationships...

How often have you lost a sale, or watched it go into 'decision hell', when you know your product or service would actually make a huge difference - in the prospect's revenue, in the technology integration, in daily living? How frustrating has it been to be told 'no' when your product is the best in the field, priced well, and you've given an excellent presentation - and you know, from your research or meeting with the prospect, that they really need it? How often have you lost a sale to a competitor that sells a product of lesser value and higher cost – because the buyer just couldn't differentiate?

It's not about the product. It's about the decision needed in order to do something different.

WHEN PEOPLE TAKE ACTION

Until or unless buyers know how to align their internal norms around change, they will not take action.

People live in a system – a set of circumstances – that works. Whether it works well or not is moot; it works the way it works. And you coming along with a better widget would disrupt their system.

People would rather continue along with their status quo – even if it's inferior – then change if they believe they will experience chaos when they do something different.

I did some sales training with a well-known insurance carrier. They experienced a 600% increase in sales in 4 weeks following the training. Then they stopped further training and redeployed their people. The reason? The results disrupted too many existing systems (pay equity, coaching, supervising, managing, job descriptions). They would rather earn less money and have a greater level of comfort with their old systems.

Until or unless buyers are willing to do something different, to be ready to change what they are doing, to move around existing systems and rules, to manage relationships with partners and supervisors and vendors, they're not going to do anything different. And presenting all of your wonderful data, showing the buyer exactly why they can't live without your product, does not help them reach a buying decision.

HOW DO PEOPLE BUY

Before people disrupt their status quo, several things must happen.

1. they must recognize what exactly isn't working (and why);
2. they must be convinced they can't fix the problem with familiar resources (i.e. internal folks or current vendors);
3. they must know how to manage all of the internal variables that will come under stress when the new product or service is added into the mix.

They will NOT buy your product because it's good, or even because it's needed, if they do not manage their internal systems to make sense of how your product will enter, and work within, their environment.

People buy a product to solve a business problem – not because a product is good, or even necessary.

When you present, you are still left with the issues of competition, adoption, price, understanding, customization, and implementation.

Line up all of the client's buying criteria *before* you present – most effectively in the front of the room (with all of the people present including the stranger in the back) before you even walk over to the projector. Get your buyers to figure out what they need to consider in their entire business environment before they will consider making a purchase. Only when they know exactly what a solution will look like will it be feasible for you to execute a successful presentation.

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