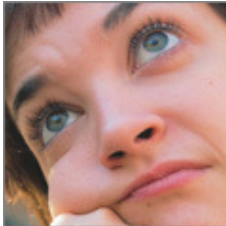


DELIVERING FIGURES WITH IMPACT - MAKING YOUR FINANCIAL PRESENTATIONS INTERESTING

Jim Lawless - 18-Jun-2008

For too long finance directors have made presentations dull; their belief is that because financial information is boring, there is no choice but to deliver it in a dull way. Not true, says inspirational speaker and trainer Jim Lawless, who offers tips on how to keep your audience engaged when presenting financial information.



Making presentations in public is a daunting experience for most people. The fear that you will bore your audience and they won't pay attention to what you're saying only makes it worse. It is tempting to think that the problem is with the source material itself – surely everyone knows figures are boring? This is not true.

Anyone who has already resigned themselves to boring their audience before they have even got up to speak has committed a cardinal public-speaking sin. You genuinely don't have to resign yourself to sending everyone to sleep.

Figures are a representation of human activity. That means they tell stories about what people in the company, in the market and in even in the government, have been doing. That should be exciting. All this might seem elementary, but finance directors have so much to think about at such a high level that they can get bogged down in the minutiae. Better presenting techniques can seem obvious in retrospect but in the day-to-day timetable it becomes hard for FDs to see how they can change their presentations and engage their audience. Of course, you need to vary your style from the main boardroom to the annual shareholders' conference, but here are a few ideas you can use to make your next presentation go with a bigger bang.

1. Stories and analogies

Instead of thinking of yourself as presenting figures, remember it's not just a sheet of numbers, but the values and visions of the company you're conveying.

"Better presenting techniques can seem obvious in retrospect but in the day-to-day timetable it becomes hard for FDs to see how they can change their presentations and engage their audience."



'Boring' figures are always the result of more interesting human activity, so it can be incredibly useful to work out what the story is within the information you're presenting. Do the figures reflect any interesting industry trends or are they the result of an initiative? Is it all down to better credit control? Once you incorporate the human element underneath the figures, you'll find it far easier to engage your audience on a human level; tell them their story from your unique viewpoint and above all, make it very clear what part that they have to play in shaping the story moving forward.

Using analogies can also be a very useful way of presenting information that seems dull on first inspection. For example, in the old children's fairytale, the three little pigs built their houses with materials of different reliability levels. Could you use this analogy to match different investment plans? Using well-known fables and other analogies can also give you scope to create more interesting graphics to match, all of which can help engage your audience far more than you might expect.

2. Make your graphics work for you

Finance people are often told that it is better to use graphs rather than figures in a spreadsheet. This is good advice, as an illustrated trend tells a story faster than the figures can. Using graphics to show how far a particular project has progressed and how much still needs to be achieved can be incredibly useful. And it will work all the better if you spend a little time making them look as clear and compelling as possible; think about how you yourself would best understand the figures, how would you like to see them presented?

3. Distribute complex figures in advance



It can often help to distribute the figures to your audience in advance of the presentation, so that they have had time to digest them. Of course there are potential downsides of doing this, one being that given sufficient time to study the figures, your audience might ask questions that you would rather not have put to you in the presentation room. There is also the risk that if they know the facts too well, they'll be less likely to be interested in the presentation. There are clear political considerations involved with advanced distribution (and equally with electronic distribution) so this approach won't work every time, but it is most definitely worth considering.

4. Use handouts for detail

If the figures you are presenting are particularly detailed, consider turning off PowerPoint and working from a paper handout (again, carefully put together and clearly presented) that everyone has in front of them.

5. Give a tutorial

Everyone loves to learn new things, so if the business is demonstrating a 'classic J

curve', then you need to remember that this type of statistical terminology might

mean a whole lot more to you than it does to your audience. And if they don't understand, then it's natural that they won't engage. You can use a tutorial to make sure that your audience knows what your terms mean and why these things are happening – and to clearly explain what their next step should be. Be aware that they will generally only want snippets or they may feel overwhelmed, or that their time is being wasted.

6. Put the figures in context

Figures are fascinating when put into a context (which is another form of storytelling) and this can increase their impact tremendously. But comparison need not be merely a year-on-year contrast. Try making some more adventurous comparisons instead:

- If you work in a huge company, where would you be in the FTSE 250 if your department were floated off from the company?
- If you work in a tiny company, are you currently more profitable than one of a large but loss-making household name? How much more profitable, per head?
- Tell your people what percentage of the group revenue they are responsible for generating and explain clearly what that translates to e.g. 'That's £X per employee.'

7. Use games and quizzes

This is not a technique that is appropriate for every presentation or every audience, but it may be appropriate:

- When you are delivering a team's numbers to that team – and they are (generally) good
- When you are presenting top level corporate figures to a 'local' team (good or bad news)
- When you are presenting to an internal or industry conference (good news only)
- Educating new-comers to the business

Using these simple techniques can make the world of difference to engaging an audience but if you're still finding presenting financial information a challenge you might find that investing in some soft-skills training can help you to build up confidence. The most important thing of all is to be clear on what you need the audience to take away from your session and to be passionate about getting it across to them because your clarity and enthusiasm will be transmitted to your audience.

Jim Lawless is one of Europe's most sought after conference speakers. His new business [ZooBites.com](http://www.zoobites.com) aims to revolutionise training.