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PART ONE: DETAILS

In a Manner of Speaking

What Donald Rumsfeld can teach us about selling that Tony Robbins can't.

By [Ellyn Spragins](#)

The best presentation I've recently seen lacked humor, grace, and PowerPoint.

The speaker was cranky, opinionated, and perfectly willing to offend his audience. But the old guy did one thing fabulously well: He connected intensely with his listeners. For achieving that feat, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld should be your new role model. Because, frankly, you stink at engaging your audience. No one's had the guts to tell you, because you're the boss. You trot out the same Tony Robbins act—lightly embellished with jokes and dazzling animation—for your banker as for your customers. True, it's an occupational hazard for company owners who represent their businesses to diverse groups every day. But it's also lazy. So roll out of your recliner and break those habits.

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It's all about me. Bosses find it hard to be humble. But making a presentation doesn't mean 20 minutes of focusing on you, your company, or your products. What?!! Isn't that precisely the purpose of luring the biggest potential customer you've ever met into a conference room?

No. First, divine your listeners' secret desires. Your prospective customer, for instance, is wondering if your inventory software is any better than the system that keeps snarling traffic in his warehouse. Before you open your mouth, put yourself in your audience's shoes, suggests Diane DiResta, the president of DiResta Communications on Staten Island, N.Y., and author of *Knockout Presentations: How to Deliver Your Message With Power, Punch, and Pizzazz* (Chandler House Press, 1998). Fill in the blank in this sentence: At the end of my presentation my audience will _____.

PowerPoint dependency. Your bullet points and snazzy graphics and the video office tour featuring your new Aeron chairs are all very nice. But guess what? They're a crutch. Sure, a PowerPoint presentation takes eight pairs of eyes off you—whew!--but it can't make that vital connection with your customers. When was the last time you were wowed by an ATM's graphics or a supermarket scanner's readout? Never? If you remember anything at all, it's a bank clerk's friendliness or a grocery bagger's enthusiasm.

Swear off PowerPoint. If you can't forgo the technological security blanket, keep your slides to a minimum and do not--repeat, do not--read them. Say something new. But you'll create an even bigger impression by making eye contact, asking for impressions, or even giving a quiz.

Kill them with data. I forgive you for collecting every pertinent fact, figure, and statistic for your presentation, but your

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audience may not. Listeners know what to do with too much information: shut off their ears and brains. "These days no one can bear to read one more e-mail or absorb one more new concept," says DiResta.

One crucial technique for easy listening: Use simple demonstrations for complicated ideas. Instead of describing bandwidth with daunting techno-babble, consider showing how much more easily a soda bottle, representing text, travels through a cardboard cylinder than does a gallon-sized milk jug, representing graphics.

And inject some emotion into your presentation. Behind even the toughest faces in your audience there's a trace of squishy human sentiment. By all means describe the way your last loan for capital expenditures fattened revenues. But don't forget to tell how a junior associate devised a completely unexpected new use for software purchased with the loan. Facts are important, but stories humanize you and your business.

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