

Further Your School Panache by Giving a Conference Presentation!

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I have given hundreds of live presentations—workshops and lectures, first as a professional speaker for 7 years, then and now as an online educator. When doing so many of these one gets to learn a

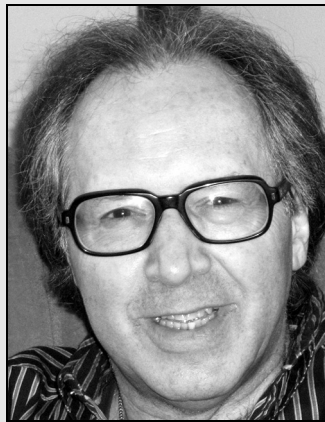
trick our two about the presentation process—and how to make that presentation a stellar performance. Doing these presentations simply because you enjoy it and because it adds to your professional growth are fine in themselves—but schools also appreciate its faculty members giving presentations at conferences as it spreads the brand of the university or college, the faculty member adds a bit more prestige to the school, and it helps cement the faculty member's role as a valuable teaching asset.

Many reading this column have no doubt given presentations at conferences, and thus you can easily add to the suggestions I here offer. But these are the most basic—and most important. And if you've yet to give a presentation, do read on—then dive in: you and so many others will be glad you did!

Here are the “must do”:

KNOW YOUR EXPERTISE— AND BE SURE IT IS JUST THAT

It easy to be a “Jack of all trades, master of none”—but when it comes to sending in a



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proposal for a conference you need to be at least a master of one. For at the conference you will find industry leaders and folks with solid expertise in your field, and the only way you can expect to be selected as a presenter is to have experience in a field that is commensurate with others wanting to learn from you, to take away “game-changing” info and ideas from you.

BE ON TOP OF THE LATEST INDUSTRY RESEARCH AND TRENDS IN YOUR FIELD

You may be considered the best of the best at your school in one or two areas—such as engaging students, creating videos, student motivation, giving assignment feedback, et cetera—but what research and trends exist on a wider scope? Distance learning is everywhere, and thus there is a world—literally!—of information, suggestions, and insights on hundreds of e-learning topics. Be sure to search out your area as thoroughly as possible online, including articles in distance learning journals, presentations given at recent e-learning conferences, and new books on the subject. Certainly, you cannot know every piece of research, every person’s offering on a subject, but you do want to be as knowledgeable as possible.

SEARCH OUT CONFERENCES WITH A GOOD FIT TO YOUR GENERAL AREA

When you start looking for possible conferences at first you may think you’ve discovered a cornucopia of possibilities, as there are many conferences throughout the United States and abroad, and nearly every month of the year. But look closely: some may have general, more all-inclusive topic areas, but others will be very specific. For example—is your presentation going to be a good fit for women teaching online? Can you offer riveting information on the technological aspects of distance learning? Are you qualified to present at

an online educators’ conference where the teaching focus is American history? Each conference will have a general overview of its theme, and then a list of topic areas: be sure you can fit into the former and that one of the latter is a perfect match! (TIP: It will take some time to do online research for conferences; make a list of possible present and future possibilities. And certainly be on the lookout for any announcements from professional organizations to which you belong.)

KNOW THE TYPE OF PRESENTATION YOU WANT TO GIVE

Each conference offers the opportunity for a solo presentation (sometimes called a “conference presentation”), team presentations (also known as “panel discussions” or “panel presentations”), poster presentations (areas of your research are highlighted textually and visually on poster boards, and the presenter stands next to them, available for questions), and a “respondent session” (where one person gives his or her presentation orally, then another with an opposite view gives a reply, with the original presenter having the last word). Each offers pluses and minuses, and you need to decide which of these formats are available, the best fit for your idea, and—when available—picking a teammate or teammates who equals your knowledge of expertise in at least one component of your selected subject area.

THE KEY TO ACCEPTANCE: DEVELOP A TOPIC THAT IS UNIQUE AND AUDIENCE ENGAGING

Once you have all the pieces in place to make a presentation you want to present it to the conference personnel who decide on the presenters in a format that is unique, will be engaging, and appears intriguing. As an example, “How to Better Engage Students in an Online Class” may tell the focus of your presentation, but “Using

Wow, Be-Bop, and Yippee-Ki-Yay for Guaranteed Online Student Engagement” is quirky, attention grabbing, and unusual. Of course, the abstract you give for the presentation must be solid, telling why the presentation is important, what the attendees can hope to learn from it, and how it fits the conference theme—mentioning (important!) there will be humor and integration (no-one likes a talking head for 45 minutes or so!) scattered throughout. If the opportunity exists, see what past presentations were given—these can also give you ideas of what to avoid or embrace.

BE SURE YOU COMPLETE ALL PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Each proposal has several parts to it, and nearly all are online—and each one has a deadline. Before you begin filling out anything be sure you read the requirements for each part, as you may need to gather some information you don’t have readily available. When you are ready to fill it out do not do this on the form, but rather set up a blank document page for each section. This way, you can edit, delete, expand, and ultimately improve without having to worry about the site timing out or—worse—accidentally sending it off (this has happened more often than you might expect). Before transferring your text over to the online proposal form do one more check to be sure all sections have been answered, all required information has been provided, and you have proof-read it one more time. Now you are ready to submit your proposal!

WHEN ACCEPTED IMMEDIATELY CONFIRM WITH THE CONFERENCE LIAISON

Usually, there will be some information on the conference site as to how long it takes before you are notified if accepted. Be sure

to check on a regular basis, for when notified of your acceptance you not only want to immediately confirm (almost always required) but also send a personal note to the person in charge of presenters letting him or her know how excited you are about presenting. Why: this makes you more than a bunch of bits and bytes on a proposal form, and begins the important process of getting you known to “the powers that be” in the conference. Combine this with doing a good job at the presentation, and you’ll have an easier time getting accepted at their next conference in which you have an interest. (NOTE: If you are turned down don’t despair; thousands receive the “not this time” e-mail every year. Certainly, it’s not personal; see what you can learn about being turned down—including asking the presenter chair—so you can better hone your proposal.)

KEEP YOUR PRESENTATION TO THE STIPULATED GUIDELINES

Without question, the biggest problem presenter coordinators and presentation attendees encounter is the presenter who goes on far longer than his or her stipulated time—never let this be you! Not only does it leave a bad taste in the minds of those in charge of the presenters—making it more difficult for a return trip—but it turns off an audience, resulting in less-than-stellar evaluations. For this reason, practice your presentation several times before giving it so you can stay within the stated time limit. Also, know any protocol (such as if someone will first introduce you), whom to thank at the beginning and end of your presentation, any audio/visual requirements you might have—and how they are filled, and the lighting controls (if you need to use them). You always want to work within the conference rules for presenters; it’s one way of saying, “I’m a good fit!”

INCORPORATE ALL THE RULES FOR GIVING A GREAT LIVE PRESENTATION

There are basic rules, of course, for anyone giving an oral session: good enunciation, not speaking too fast, having nice tone modulation, delivering in a strong voice, using body language to your advantage (including looking in the audience's eyes and not flailing your hands as if a symphonic conductor!), and being nicely dressed. Beyond these, however, are smaller items that are just as important: calling on audience members and asking/answering questions (you don't want to give a flat-out lecture), having a smooth give and take if presenting with a partner/partners (practice this beforehand so it doesn't appear awkward at show time), sometimes incorporating audience comments/questions into your presentation (this gives it a more spontaneous feel), and using humor now and then. Also: don't forget the importance of personal stories to underscore a few of your points—these are always interesting to the audience, and show that you have lived what you present. More than anything, remember: you either own the audience or it will own you

(translation: show your confidence of subject and presenting throughout!).

A BONUS: HAVE A HANDOUT FOR THE AUDIENCE

Everybody like freebies—we grab them at vendors' tables, at fairs, at food and cultural festivals, at museums. The same goes at conferences, and this becomes especially important at a presentation, so have a handout or two ready, in tangible form. There are three reasons for this: it is a freebie that also serves as an "I-can-touch-it" reminder of you and the presentation; it will have valuable info in it that piggybacks or expands on your conference subject, thus extending your presentation beyond XX minutes; and it shows you put in 110% effort to make your presentation as good as possible. Keep in mind that so often it is the small things that either do you up or do you in!

Remember: Socrates simply stood on a rock, and they came; Lincoln was Lincoln, so they came; Houdini had magic, and so they came—but today's presenter has theses and that's to first perfect ... but when done they, too, will come!