

The Art of Presentations: Why You Should Break the Rules

Earlier this month, Jaffe held its annual firm retreat in Nashville. We devoted almost one full day to the art of presentations. Presentations are something attorneys and legal marketers do every day. Whether it's a new business presentation, teaching a CLE seminar, making a pitch for a new marketing initiative during a partners' meeting or a one-on-one discussion during a networking event, presentation skills are critical.

Karen Hough, CEO of [ImprovEdge](#), a company that offers presentation training using improvisation to teach business skills, was our guest presenter. Before starting her own company, Hough was a professional improviser and actor, having studied at Chicago's well-known Second City Training Center. She masterfully shared what she learned as an improviser and how it can be applied successfully to effective presentations.

Place Passion Over Being Polished

Karen started the day by comically showing us what makes a bad presentation, such as being poorly prepared or too scripted. She stressed that authenticity and passion are what will grab the attention of an audience. In her book, *"Be the Best Bad Presenter Ever: break the rules, make mistakes, and then win them over,"* Hough writes, "Audiences would much rather watch someone who is passionate about his or her topic, who isn't polished and perfect on stage, than someone who is slick and soulless."

Hough acknowledges what many of us already know – that the vast majority of people are not comfortable speaking in front of a room full of strangers, or worse, our colleagues and peers. She points out that one reason for this is many of us worry about having to conform to all sorts of handed-down rules, such as practicing in front of a mirror or picturing the audience in their underwear. Such misguided advice leaves us in knots and the result is sure to put our audience to sleep.

Develop Your "Hook"

How many of us were instructed to open with an introduction and close with questions? Well, Hough strongly advised that we break this rule. Instead, Hough recommends we use "bookends." What she means is that we need to make sure the first thing our audience hears – the "hook" – is memorable and that, after our interim information, the last thing they hear is also noteworthy.

The hook can be as simple as asking your audience a rhetorical question and then providing the answer. "How many attorneys present wish to start a blog, but don't think they have the time? Well, I'm here to give you some alternatives to sharing your content with potential clients."



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Hone Your Takeaways

At the end of your presentation, summarize the information you really want the audience to remember. Hough suggests using the power of repetition to teach the audience the main points of the presentation. It's still fine to have a Q&A session at the conclusion of a presentation, but don't let the final question and answer be the last thing the audience hears. A call to action is a great way to wrap things up for your audience, such as, "Blogging is a great way to reach potential clients, but try other forms of social media before you commit to a blog."

First Impressions Matter

Hough also explained how first impressions are very important and that people quickly size someone up fairly quickly. Researchers at New York University have shown that people form opinions of others within the first 7 to 30 seconds. She noted that research has also shown that people pay much closer attention to a person's body language and tone of voice than they do to the actual content of their presentations. She pointed out that attorneys are usually dismayed to hear this fact, since they place greater value on the content of their presentations.

Have a Clear Objective

One of the more important tips that Hough shared with our Jaffe team was that the key to a successful professional presentation is to have a clear objective. Is it to win a client's business? Or to convince the firm to invest in updating its website? Whatever your goal, make sure you're clear about it ahead of time so your presentation stays on track.

Do you have any tips or tricks to improve your presentations? Leave a comment below or contact Carlos Arcos at carcos@jaffepr.com. If you're interested in more useful instruction on how to give a good presentation, check out Hough's book, *Be the Best Bad Presenter Ever: break the rules, make mistakes, and then win them over*.