

# Dynamic Dozen **DELIVERY**

Tips from top presenters from the American Evaluation Association

This study consisted of interviews with a dozen of the top AEA presenters to get their secrets about how to make and deliver great presentations. Their comments were grouped into three stages of presenting: message, design, and delivery. This report focuses solely on Delivery, that is, the execution of a well-prepared presentation. While the context for their talks spanned long and short presentations, and included different types of audiences and purposes, their insights can be used or modified by evaluators for their own presentations at the AEA annual conference and elsewhere. Moreover, their suggestions may not be suited for the comfort level of all presenters. Take what you can and apply it to your own context to make your presentations more potent.

The final stage in the presentation cycle is delivery. When the Dynamic Dozen talked about their strategies for solid delivery, they pointed out these 10 areas: practice, be natural, ease the nerves, assess the audience, connect with the audience, manage the audience, pace yourself, handle the discussion, reflect, and revise.

## **PRACTICE PRACTICE PRACTICE**

When the Dynamic Dozen recalled presentation blunders, the most common cause was a lack of preparation. Practice is essential to a good presentation. Generally, our presenters identified two goals for practicing. First, practice is to make sure the content flows error-free. The second goal was to check timing, since most presentations have a defined limit which should be respected. How did our presenters practice?

1. **In front of colleagues.** Some practiced in front of colleagues, employers, or family members to collect feedback about whether the content was on target and relevant. Although family members may not be content experts, they can help identify jargon or language that could lose actual audience members.

2. **Internally.** Some read the presentation over in their head as a way to prepare.
3. **Out loud and alone.** Some suggested that reading a presentation out loud was particularly helpful because it provided an opportunity to rehearse how the presentation would evolve live. A few said they practiced their presentation in the mirror, particularly when planning to give an important talk, like a keynote.
4. **Memorize the beginning and end.** Several noted that, when practicing, they only focused on the beginning and end, or “the first five minutes and the last five minutes.” One participant said this was because the most likely time to panic is at the beginning and/or end of a presentation and thus memorizing those pieces anchors the talk to provide the foundation for a smooth delivery.

Although the Dynamic Dozen have been giving presentations for more than 25 years, many reported they still practice beforehand but how they practice often changed as they gained experience. For example, one expert said speakers “graduate in phases” as they develop as a presenter. At first, presenters often begin with a more formal rehearsal using multiple methods of practice which could include those just listed. As presenters gain experience they often graduate to a semiformal rehearsal. In this phase presenters continue to draw on multiple methods but are more selective, such as using one live audience instead of three different groups. In the final phase of development, presenters rely more on the internal method for practicing as more experienced presenters tend to “know internally when presentations are off-key.”

### **BE NATURAL**

Knowing and understanding one’s own presentation style, strengths, and weaknesses comes with time and practice. Most presenters in this study did not see themselves as experts, but rather still very much in the process of learning how to be good speakers. Here are three examples of how presenters learned to recognize their own style:

1. **Emulating other presenters.** Two of our Dynamic Dozen spoke of times when they identified a presenter they liked and tried to emulate their style. In both cases they quickly realized fully emulating someone else’s presentation style wouldn’t work; therefore, they kept pieces of what they liked about the presenter and blended that with their own comfort level, thus growing in skill while also remaining authentic and natural.
2. **Injecting humor.** Although tools such as stories and humor can be useful, they can also be troublesome for speakers who don’t naturally

integrate those elements in their day-to-day lives; some presenters advised against using humor if it felt forced.

3. **Talking fast.** It was not uncommon for some presenters to be told they speak fast when presenting. To mediate this problem, one participant provided two strategies:
  - a. **Present with someone.** Finding someone “whose personality and presentation style is opposite” can help “balance shortcomings.”
  - b. **Use reminders.** Handwritten reminders in the margins of speaker notes that say take a “deep breath” or “slow down” can serve as helpful cues to take a healthy pause.

## EASE THE NERVES

Although the majority of our speakers have been presenting 25 years or more, some still get nervous. What do they do to combat their anxiety?

1. **Focus on breathing.** Just before the presentation, breathing can become rapid and shallow; therefore they mindfully focused on taking slower, deeper breaths. Some said they had to continually remind themselves to breathe throughout the presentation.
2. **Take a drink of water.** Some started the presentation by taking a sip of water as way to provide a moment to collect their thoughts, calm their nerves, and focus their efforts before they began talking. They recommended taking water breaks throughout the talk and reminded that “a pause seems ten times longer to you” than it does to the audience.



### PRO TIP

IF YOUR AUDIENCE ASSESSMENT YIELDS LARGELY EXPERTS, MOVE TO A DISCUSSION FORMAT AS A MORE USEFUL WAY FOR EXPERTS TO SHARE EXPERIENCES AND LEARN FROM EACH OTHER.

## ASSESS THE AUDIENCE

As discussed in the report on Message, tailoring the presentation to the audience is critical; however one isn't always in a position to know the audience in depth ahead of time. The primary goal of audience assessment is use the presentation content to expose the audience's experience level so that the remaining content can be tailored on the spot. For example, if the audience member assessment yielded a high level of expertise, some presenters reported they would move to a discussion format as a more useful way to share experiences and learn from each other. Although adapting a presentation on the fly might be challenging, both practice and experience will help to develop this skill. What techniques did our Dynamic Dozen use to assess their audience?

1. **Scenario-based questions.** Some planted questions at the beginning of the presentation as a way to assess audience expertise level. In one case, the speaker provided a real life scenario and then asked the

audience to anticipate its outcome. In a similar example, one expert described using an "... indirect [case] application where I start with an experience that they may not see how it applies" to the presentation topic in order to "reveal audience experience and expertise as they worked through these complex cases." In both situations the experts said if audience members were unable to anticipate the outcome, their responses clued the speaker in to the expertise level in the room. One said, after the first exercise "It will become clear and I adjust accordingly...if the audience is new then I will go slower and for a more advanced audience I will keep all the complexity and go quicker."

2. **Table talk.** Audience members were asked to work through a problem together, as a table or small group, over a short time frame. Presenters then walked around the room checking in on the tables to assess how they were responding to the question. Similar content adjustments could then be made to the rest of the presentation. In shorter presentations, asking for a quick show of hands could elicit a similar assessment of expertise level.

## CONNECT WITH THE AUDIENCE

Audience engagement is a way to guide the audience through the content and make connections with the key points being presented. Our speakers provided several recommendations to connect with the audience.



### PRO TIP

GET TO THE ROOM EARLY TO CONNECT WITH THE AUDIENCE AND FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THEM.

1. **Meet with audience members before the talk begins.** Some speakers greeted audience members as they arrived. This helped presenters to engage, learn more about the audience and their interests, and identify their expertise and experience levels.
2. **Get out from behind the podium and/or off the stage.** The Dynamic Dozen said, when possible, they walked around the room to get a better connection with audience members. For example, one participant reported standing in the corner of the room to get a better view of all audience members at one time, providing a better sense of the group as a whole.
3. **Use activities.** The activities created during message preparation will go a long way in connecting with audience members. Story sharing among audience members can elicit more interest and break up the presentation into smaller, more digestible pieces. One participant implemented the 80/20 rule when presenting: the presenter listens 80% of the time and talks 20% of the time. While this rule is dependent on the type of presentation being given, it still serves as a good reminder to let the audience to take an active role in their own learning.

4. **Read body language.** The Dynamic Dozen looked for audience eye contact, head nods, and body posture as indications of connection. One participant said, “I can generally tell when I’m losing people because their eyes shift and people stop taking notes.” If you feel like you’re losing your audience, change gears. Introduce an activity, have people stand up and stretch, take a break, or check in with the audience by asking them. Although body language can be a good clue to audience attention, several experts admitted that when they were in the role of audience member, they often checked email, even though they were connected with the content.

### MANAGE THE AUDIENCE

Presentation delivery will invariably require audience management by the presenter. Our presenters noted that this can be particularly troubling for inexperienced presenters and they recommended these techniques:

1. **Don’t always ask everyone to share.** When wrapping up group activities such as pair- or table-sharing, presenters usually begin by asking audience members to volunteer answers. As audience members share, experts then ask others with the same ideas to just raise their hands. The presenters then call on only those who have different ideas. One expert said, “I think my approach is best for forward movement instead of honoring each thing everyone said.”
2. **Call on people by name.** Some used nametags or table tents to identify audience names and then called on underengaged individuals.
3. **Be comfortable with silence.** Questions can sometimes fall flat but one presenter recommended waiting through a count of ten to encourage the audience to participate.
4. **Sometimes it’s not the audience you have to manage.** One participant recalled a time when the wait staff began clearing tables during the start of the talk and the room became noisy. To manage this the presenter “used some tricks of the trade” and “asked the audience to pair-off and discuss an important evaluation issue that I then asked them about later in the presentation. I hadn’t planned to do that, but that comes from experience.”

## PACE YOURSELF

Keeping the presentation within the given time parameters is important. Underestimating the amount of content and time could cause the speaker to rush through the remainder of the presentation or leave some unfinished, both of which can frustrate audience members. As discussed earlier, practicing will help to meet the demands of time parameters; however, some of our Dynamic Dozen noted that inexperienced presenters tend to move through content more quickly than they think. Some techniques presenters used to help pace themselves include:

1. **Q & A breaks.** A few of the Dynamic Dozen periodically checked in with the audience to make sure they were following along and had no lingering questions. The timing of the Q&A session can also be restricted or lengthened depending on the need to get back on schedule.
2. **Timing.** Different presentations will call for different methods of time-tracking. For example, one participant projected a timer on the screen, so both the audience and presenter were accountable for time management. In shorter conference sessions, there is usually a session chair to watch the clock and signal to the speaker when time is nearly up. Audience members can also be solicited to manage this task.

Once the presentation has been delivered, most people think “whew, I’m done,” but there are still three areas of delivery to consider: discussion, reflection, and revision.

## HANDLE THE DISCUSSION

Some of the Dynamic Dozen recognized that answering audience questions and engaging in discussion can be complex. So, what techniques did they use to handle discussion questions?



### PRO TIP

YOU CAN'T KNOW ALL THE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS, BUT YOU CAN FIGURE OUT THE ANSWER BY USING YOUR AUDIENCE MEMBERS.

1. **It's okay to say “I don't know.”** Although the Dynamic Dozen know their content well and have considered potential questions during the preparation phase, they can't anticipate every question asked. They admitted it took time for them to be comfortable saying they didn't know the answer.
2. **If you don't know the answer, ask the audience.** Some suggested that if they didn't know the answer to a question they would turn the question over to the audience and generally someone could contribute an answer.
3. **Work out the answer together.** If there isn't an audience member who knows the answer, often there is enough expertise in the room to work out the answer to the question as a group. One presenter would offer, “Let's think about this together.”

4. **Don't let tangents steer you off course.** Audience members can sometimes ask questions that are off topic, leading the discussion away from the key points of the presentation. Speakers tried redirecting questions so that they aligned with the presentation's key points or asked the audience member to talk about the question individually afterward.

## REFLECT

Even though these seasoned top presenters give at least 20 presentations a year, every one does not go well. What do presenters do if a presentation doesn't go well?

1. **Reflect on strengths and weaknesses.** After an unsuccessful presentation most took time to reflect on what needed correction.
2. **Remember, they don't want to see you bomb.** Some suggested it is important to keep in mind that audience members are generally supportive and they are not looking to see you do poorly. It may not have been as bad to the audience as the presenter thinks.
3. **Seek tips from expert presenters.** Working with other presenters to develop presentation skills is an important part of community, regardless of the amount of presentation experience. Talking with other expert presenters or seeking advice from colleagues will help strengthen presentations.
4. **Seek evaluation.** Some asked audience members to complete an evaluation form after every presentation. The form generally asked audience members to identify strengths, challenges, and potential changes to the presentation to make it stronger.

## REVISE REVISE REVISE

Whether it's directly after the presentation or before it's given again, all presentations need to be revised. How did our Dynamic Dozen revise their presentations?

1. **Sit down immediately to incorporate changes.** Several reported editing the talk shortly after it was given, as it was fresh in their mind and they were better equipped to identify what worked and what didn't.
2. **Take notes during the talk for later revision.** One participant jotted notes on printed PowerPoint slides during the presentation, while another took notes after the presentation had concluded. In both cases the notes were then filed and consulted when preparing future presentations.

## Further Resources

Ready to extend your delivery skills? Check out these resources compiled from AEA members.

### WATCH

[Every Presentation Ever](#) video – This funny video pokes at the mistakes we all sweat during presentation delivery.

### READ

Andy Goodman's paper, [Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes](#) – This awesome report covers all aspects of presenting, but chapter 3 hones in on delivery.

Garr Reynolds' website, [Top Ten Delivery Tips](#) – This well-known presentation guru gives great advice. See especially tips 5, 6, and 8.

Stephanie Evergreen's blog posts, [Moving Emphasis](#) and [Slow Reveal](#) – These are two strategies for delivering slide content while maintaining a connection to the audience.

### DOWNLOAD

Kathy McKnight's "Rundown Doc" – This is a tool to organize a delivery. See her complete [example](#) and download a blank [template](#) for your own use.

## About the Dynamic Dozen

We interviewed 12 evaluators from 3 different countries, including: Canada, Australia, and the United States. Here are the Dynamic Dozen:

[Gail Barrington](#)

[Jean King](#)

[Tom Chapel](#)

[Susan Kistler](#)

[Phaedra Corso](#)

[Michael Quinn Patton](#)

[David Devlin-Foltz](#)

[Patricia Rogers](#)

[David Fetterman](#)

[Jeff Wasbes](#)

[Robert Kahle](#)

[Rebecca Woodland](#)

On average the experts have been presenting more than 25 years and present more than 20 times each year. They reported currently spending about half as much time preparing for presentations as when they first started presenting. When asked if they had studied the art of presenting, half of them said they had reflected on their own presentations, observed other presenters, read books, or taken classes. We asked the dynamic dozen to identify another presenter they admired. They identified:

[Steve Jobs](#)

[George Carlin](#)

[Dick Hardt](#)

[Hans Rosling](#)

[Mike Morris](#)

[Hettie Roessingh](#)

[Andy Papachristos](#)

[Malcolm Gladwell](#)

[Andy Goodman](#)

[Michael Quinn Patton](#)

[Larry Lessing](#)

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ABOUT THE STUDY METHODS.



## About Us

The [American Evaluation Association](#) is an international professional association of evaluators devoted to the application and exploration of program evaluation, personnel evaluation, technology, and many other forms of evaluation. Evaluation involves assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness. AEA has approximately 7300 members representing all 50 states in the US as well as over 60 foreign countries.

The American Evaluation Association commissioned this study as part of the [Potent Presentation Initiative](#) (p2i). p2i is designed to help AEA members improve their presentation skills on at the AEA annual conference and beyond through professional development around presentation message, design, and delivery. Based on audience ratings from past AEA presentations, we identified the top 12 presenters to interview them about their strategies around message, design, and delivery. Their advice can help both budding and seasoned presenters develop and refine their presentation skills and efforts.

This report was prepared by Anjanette Raber under contract with the American Evaluation Association.



Figure 1. A *Wordle*, or word cloud, visually describing the skills and characteristics of the admired presenters. *Humor, stories, visuals, and connections* were repeating themes among presentations skills that were admired.