

15 Tips to a Dynamite Presentation

These tips are divided into three sections:

- Respect Your Audience
- Presentation Creation
- Avoiding Mr. Murphy

Respect Your Audience

Tip 1: Be Prepared!

Your listeners are giving you one hour of their life. If there are 100 people in your audience, that's 100 hours that will never be recovered. They are giving you a powerful sign of respect. Honor them by being fully prepared and not wasting their time.

Tip 2: Practice twice beforehand.

Deliver your presentation out loud from start to finish at least twice before you give it. Yes, that means you're probably going to spend at least three hours on a one-hour talk. Time yourself so that you have some idea of how long your talk takes.

Tip 3: Don't trash talk.

The days of the monopoly are over and there are a variety of operating systems in your audience. Ten percent of your Windows users, 80% of your Mac users, and 100% of your Linux users have a religious passion towards their choice of operating system. Ditto browser software. Why tick off any of them? Just stay away from these topics unless it is relevant to your discussion (eg it's not trash talking to point out a business-relevant fact such as 2/3 of all web servers use LAMP).

If you have any problems during your talk that are clearly related to an identifiable technology, rest assured it will have its fan-boys and arch enemies in the audience. If they heckle, take it with good humor and a chuckle, and just move on. (See tip #14.)

Tip 4: We make mistakes, too.

You've prepared a beautiful description of your talk. Don't be surprised if the morons running the conference totally mangle it as they edit to make sure that everyone's descriptions all fit in the available space, etc.

Or we'll commit one of a thousand other gaffs. Sorry, but we're people, too. Our goal is to make sure that Dallas Drupal Days goes smoothly for everyone, but inevitably we're going to occasionally screw up. Please grant us a little extra grace.

The corollary of Tip 4 is that you make mistakes, too.

Presentation Creation

Tip 5: Use the standard speaking outline.

Experienced speakers may have their own styles, but for at least the last 2500 years, preachers, politicians, and others who speak regularly have been perfecting a good general purpose format which works well in a wide variety of settings. It's pretty much what you learned and hated in high-school: Intro, 3 points, conclusion.

Start with a short joke to warm up the audience. It's best if it is in some way apropos to what you are speaking about, but any joke that has at least the vaguest relevance to either technology, Dallas, or football will do, as long as everyone thinks it's funny.

Then give a brief introduction, telling the audience what you're about to tell them.

Give three main points. Three shall be the number thou shalt speak, and the number of the speaking shall be three. Five thou shalt not count, neither count thou one, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Six is right out. (*Two or four points are Ok in a pinch.*)

Finish up with a conclusion where you tell the audience what you just told them. Leave some time for them to ask questions. After the final question, wrap up and let your last sentence leave no doubt in their minds when your talk is over, "Go your way; be warm and filled."

Tip 6: It is far better to go too short than too long.

Nobody ever complains about being let out early, as long as you haven't blown through your entire hour-long presentation in only five minutes. They won't remember that you only took 40 minutes instead of 50. But they'll sure complain if you run over.

If you are running short and need some filler, remember that your audience is quite intelligent and probably has some questions. You should save time for questions, anyways; they won't know you planned on 5 minutes of questions but actually had 15. If they only have a few questions, they won't connect that to your talk being too short. (They may, however, connect it to your talk being boring or uninteresting...)

If you are running long and you've still got some important things to cover, direct people to your presentation, available on the Dallas Drupal Days website.

Tip 7: Don't put too much on one slide.

You can have as many slides as you need, so don't be shy about breaking up content. Each slide should only contain three or four brief bullet items. Nobody likes a speaker who just reads the slides (hey, we could do that ourselves!), so don't feel like every little detail needs to be on the slide. Put the headline

in the bullet, and then discuss the details verbally.

The exception is URLs, email addresses, and other data which needs to be entered exactly as it appears. If it's short, make sure you include it in the slide. If it is long, direct people to your (short URL) website to get it.

Tip 8: Sounds and animation are anathema.

There is never an excuse for cutsey sounds affects or animation. Yes, we know you're using cool software that supports all kinds of things. But it's soooooo distracting. We came to hear you, not see a cartoon show.

Impress and Powerpoint have dozens of ways to reveal the next bullet of text. Choose one which isn't too obnoxious.

Tip 9: An occasional picture prevents boredom.

There's a reason every missionary slideshow has pictures of smiling native kids. Photos are like salt in the stew, and the occasional photo or diagram goes a long way towards keeping your audience's interest. Best, of course, is one which is actually relevant to the topic at hand, but even one which is only tangentially relevant can a long way. Unless they are directly relevant to the talk, though, don't use photos which are funny or distracting. You want them focused on what you're saying, not where's Waldo?

For example, if the talk is on the global megatrend of mobile computing, throwing in a photo of foreign phone users in a variety of contexts, juxtapositioned to the left of each main point, may spice it up.

Avoiding Mr. Murphy

Tip 10: Murphy is strongly attracted to the unprepared.

There is a strong correlation between Murphy's appearance and lack of preparation. Those that have their act together rarely get a visit from Mr. Murphy.

Tip 11: Keep your presentation self-contained.

You're planning to do a live presentation of your nifty website in a conference room packed with geeks. What could go wrong?

Steve Jobs and Bill Gates both have entire teams devoted to making their speeches a success, and yet both have learned the hard way that relying on Internet connections when doing demonstrations is a really bad idea. The guy in the back row is actually streaming a movie from NetFlix. The geek in the front row is listening to you while bittorrenting the latest Linux ISO. The gal in the middle row is listening to Pandora on her bluetooth earpiece.

Bandwidth at conferences is a limited resource and should not be relied upon. If you are going to demo

something, have everything you need self-contained on your laptop. HINT: XAMPP is your friend.

Tip 12: Prepare Your Laptop

You may want to turn off your anti-virus if you're using a system which needs it (*oooh, did I just violate tip #3...?*) Murphy knows when your talk is and has planned a mandatory complete system antivirus scan right during the middle of it.

Don't have unencrypted confidential data on your laptop. Thieves know that speakers generally are senior people and often have a lot of interesting stuff on their laptops. The end of your talk may be chaotic in a good sense, with people milling around, wanting to meet the big wig (that's you!) and ask questions, etc. You're going to be distracted. Thieves can take advantage of this, and you are at higher risk of having someone walk off with your laptop during this time.

Tip 13: Something is going to go wrong. Prepare for it.

So your laptop decides to die 15 minutes before your talk... If you've got a copy of your presentation on a cheap USB thumb drive, then no problem, just borrow someone else's laptop.

What? All of your friends are attending the Wordpress presentation (the traitors!) (violation #2 of tip #3) and nobody is around to loan you a laptop? No problem, just whip out your hardcopy.

Yes, your hardcopy. That old fashioned thing speakers used to use before PowerPoint. It's hard to believe, but Impress and PowerPoint both do a good job of printing speaker's notes. HINT: Number the pages so it's harder to get confused in the heat of the moment.

Tip 14: Something is going to go wrong. Move on.

At some point during your talk there is likely to be a glitch of some kind or another. Don't make a big deal over it. Sure it's embarrassing, but it's already happened and the audience has seen it; as long as you haven't violated tip #3, they're generally sympathetic because nobody's perfect (see tip #4 and its corollary) and these things happen to everyone.

If you immediately know what happened and are quite sure that a quick retry will result in success, go for it. Otherwise, just move on. If you give a good talk, nobody is going to remember the glitch. They'll be thinking about how much they learned from you instead.

The bigger the deal you make of any problem, the bigger the deal the audience will make of it.

Tip 15: How to handle a reboot.

One of the biggest momentum killers in a presentation is if you have to take five minutes in the middle of it (or at the beginning; talk about getting off on the wrong foot!) to reboot your computer. To the extent possible, see tip #14 and ignore issues.

If a reboot absolutely becomes necessary at some point, start it, but then whip out your hardcopy and keep going with your presentation while it boots.

