

Avoiding Technical Difficulties in Presentations (May 07)

By Tony Jeary

I have often spoken about general ways to "Harness the Fear Factor" to allow you to manage presentation anxiety and take the stage with preparation-based confidence. This article will give you a brief on specific technical issues you need to anticipate and can easily avoid or minimize with careful preparation.

We've all seen situations wherein a fairly simple technical glitch has ruined an otherwise well-prepared presentation. In this era of "instant on", audiences and meeting participants are not very patient when presenters have to pause to fix A/V or computer problems.

In addition to the impact on the audience, technical missteps generate gut reactions in the presenter that can be difficult to recover from. These reactions manifest themselves as obvious nervousness, rushed pacing, poor voice tone/inflection, and negative body language.

Seasoned professionals are not immune to technical issues and know that extra care is needed when they are working in an unfamiliar venue or with others' equipment. Avoiding most issues altogether, and being prepared for fast recovery from problems that were unavoidable, is a hallmark of the true "pro."

How?

Here are ten common technical problems and some thoughts on how to anticipate and avoid or minimize them:

1. Needed equipment not in the room (Presentation Environment) at the show time. People usually remember to bring the projector and a computer to drive it, but often forget key pieces to make it all go together and work. The best fix for this is a checklist to assure that you, or your team, have all the right parts and have checked them to make sure they work in the room you will be using. Here are a few common "forgotten items" that should go on your list:

- Power cords for all equipment, extension cords and plug strips
- Computer-specific cords for connecting to projectors, phone lines or Ethernet outlets
- Wireless mouse
- Carpet or duct tape for taping down cords
- Screen (large enough for easy viewing at the back of the room)
- Pointer
- Fresh paper for flip charts and markers
- Wireless microphones
- Spare batteries & bulbs for all equipment
- Spare computer of the same type as the prime machine

2. Computer Issues. Space limitations here prevent a full course on why your computer may crash at inopportune times, but here are some common issues in the presentation context that you can anticipate and avoid:

- Graphics-intensive presentations use up a lot of memory and computer resources. Make sure that you have a computer with enough "horsepower" to handle your material (and those appearing before you), and reboot just prior to show time to clear memory.
- Save your presentation file on the desktop – if you do have a crash, you can quickly find your file after a reboot.
- Turn off features such as screen savers and power conservation programs and/or know how to get this specific computer out of "sleep" mode.

- Family pictures are great fun as wallpaper for your Windows Desktop, but change your wallpaper before using the computer for projection. If you need to reboot, your daughter's bathtub picture doesn't need to be seen by your audience.

3. Internet connections. Web demos can add value or in fact, be core to your presentation. Make sure you know how to establish the connection and have all needed user IDs and passwords handy. Test your connection in advance, especially if you're using someone else's machine or a connection mode that you don't normally use.

4. Video Switching Issues. Switching between video sources (e.g. from your computer to a VCR or DVD player, or to another computer) can cause serious crashes or inordinate delays. If you are using a switch box, test the transition in advance. If you're swapping cords, label the cords so you can quickly locate them in a darkened room, and test the change sequence in advance.

5. Last minute slide changes. You arrive in the room and find that you've misspelled the name of a key exec in one of your slides or have just received new data for slide #17. If you aren't a MS PowerPoint™ expert, you need to have someone cued up to help you, and quickly.

6. Audio issues. Hotel meeting rooms and other outside venues bring sometimes disastrous issues relative to sound systems. Anticipate these by knowing in advance how to turn off background music and where the panel is located that controls sound system levels. In some facilities, you won't be permitted to make these adjustments yourself, and will need to know how to get the technician on-site quickly.

7. Lighting. As with sound, lighting problems can seriously impact your presentation effectiveness. "Screen Wash" – down lights over your screen that wash out your projected images is a pervasive problem. A technical rehearsal to review your slides in advance, with room lighting set at show levels, will disclose this. Fixes can include simply turning off the offending set of lights, or unscrewing bulbs if switching isn't an option.

8. Teleprompters. Rehearsals are a **MUST**. You need to learn how to use the speed control (or communicate with the operator - this is a team effort and a common connection needs to happen prior to real-time between the presenter and the prompter tech.) and assure that the screens are placed where you can see them clearly while maintaining contact with the audience. You also need to read through the entire text to assure that no words were dropped out during the transition from the source document.

9. Projection. "Who is running the clicker?" is a common issue right before show time. If you are planning to advance your own slides, you need a wireless mouse or other remote control. If you are using a signaling device mounted on a lectern, you need to coordinate with the person actually advancing your slides to coordinate how to interpret your signals. If you are in a less formal setting, a nod to your projectionist or verbal "next slide" can work. Projectionists working off a cued script sometimes can get out of sync – in this situation, you need a team member familiar with the material placed near the projectionist to help stay on track.

10. Internet Connection and Power Failures. Internet connections are getting more reliable, but still aren't bulletproof. If a system demo is an essential element of your presentation, it's a good idea to have a pre-recorded version or a screen shots in MS PowerPoint™ on your computer as backup in case the web connection fails or the system you're demonstrating is down. Power failures are another story. If you have enough light in the room to continue and your voice will carry to the back, you can continue by using the handouts you've prepared in advance containing your key visuals. If not, quickly call for a break and continue when the lights come on or reschedule.

Benefits:

- Your careful preparation will allow you to deliver technically flawless presentations almost all of the time that will be appreciated by participants.
- Anticipation of technical issues and contingency planning will give you what we call Preparation-based confidence. This will allow you to feel that you are fully in control and competently handle unanticipated developments.
- Your reputation as a real “pro” will grow, and you will be invited back to present again.

Action Plan:

- When you, or your staff, plan your next presentation, identify all the technical items that you need for a flawless session. Write them down in a checklist form and be sure that you or your team checks everything before show time.
- Rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse! In addition to getting your words and delivery polished up, do a technical rehearsal with all of the equipment you will be using and with the people who will be supporting and working with you.
- Arrive early to set up and check the equipment in the actual setting, and adjust lighting & sound as required.

This topic is extremely valuable and could save lots of embarrassment if put in the hands of the right people inside your sphere/organization. We recommend two things special for this information - 1) copy it and hand it out to assistants, meeting planners (internal or external), graphics designers, teleprompter operators, and equipment prep folks. 2) We also encourage you to take 2 minutes and forward this with a special memo from you to various other related folks who are involved in the prep and execution of large meeting, speeches and meetings.

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