

Patricia **FRIPP** **Coaching**



12 Biggest Mistakes Sales Professionals Make in Their Presentations

By Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Like Hollywood actors, sales professionals put themselves and their companies on the line with every word—taking a risk in the hope of a favorable outcome. Just like actors, even the best, most experienced salesperson benefits from some coaching and polishing.

Here are the 12 most common mistakes that I see on the sales stage—and what you can do to avoid them:

1. Unclear thinking. Want clarity? Imagine that a busy executive says, “You have exactly ten minutes to tell me what you want me to know about your company. In one sentence, how should I describe your benefits when I talk to my managers tomorrow?” At any stage of the sales process, you should know in advance why you are interacting, what benefits you are offering your prospect or client, and what you would like the next step to be.

2. No clear structure. Make it easy for your prospect to follow what you are saying. They’ll remember it better—and you will, too. Even for a casual conversation, mentally outline your objectives. What key “Points of Wisdom” do you want the prospect to remember? How will you illustrate each point? What colorful examples will your prospect be able to repeat three days later? What phrases or slogans do you want to guarantee they will repeat afterwards? Your goal is to speak to be remembered and repeated.

3. Talking too much. The key to connecting with a client is conversation and asking questions; the quality of client information received depends on the quality of your questions—and waiting for, and listening to, the answers! A successful encounter early in the sales process should probably be mostly open-ended questions—the kind that require essay answers rather than just “yes” and “no.” And never rush on with preprogrammed questions that pay no attention to the answer you’ve just received!

4. No memorable stories. People rarely remember your exact words. Instead, they remember the mental images your words inspire. Support your key points with vivid, relevant client success stories. Help them “make the movie” in their minds by using memorable characters who are your satisfied clients. What was their starting situation? Their problem and one your prospect can relate to? When you use the dialogue of your client stating their problem and the “happy ever after” solution your product or service offered, it is as if you are taking your satisfied clients on your sales calls.

The best stories are third-party endorsements, which have your clients using much more glowing statements than you could if the words were your own. Endorsement stories should be like a good Hollywood movie: memorable characters that your prospects can identify with, vivid dialogue, and a dramatic lesson about the benefits of doing business with you.

5. No emotional connection. A customer justifies doing business with you for analytical reasons; but what gives you the edge—what I like to call the “unfair advantage”—is creating an emotional connection. Build this emotional connection by incorporating stories with characters that they can relate to, using the word “you” as often as possible, and talking from their point of view. Answer their unspoken question, “What’s in this for me?” Logic makes us think, emotion makes us act.

6. Wrong level of abstraction. Get on the same wavelength with your prospects. For first contacts with executives, describe what your company can do for them from a big picture view—a high level of abstraction. Be able to change to go deeper if their questions lead you there. With middle managers, discuss exactly how you can work together—a medium level of abstraction. If you are dealing with IT professionals, use the lowest level of abstraction: lots of data, facts, and figures. In other words, speak the same language, or bring an associate who can. Maximize each meeting.

7. No pauses. Good music and good communication both contain changes of pace and pauses. As counter intuitive as it may seem, you actually connect on the silence. This is when your audience, even if it is one person, digests and reflects on what they have heard. If you rush on at full speed to squeeze in as much information as possible, chances are your prospects remember less. Remember the rule, “Say less, say it well.” Give your clients enough time to ask a question or reflect. Pauses allow pondering and understanding.

8. Hmm...ah...err... The non-words usually fill the space where there needs to be silence. How often have you heard a presenter begin each new thought with “Now!” or “Um” or “So” as they scan notes or figure out what comes next. Practice in front of your sales manager or colleagues, giving them permission to call out whenever you hem or haw. Video and audio record yourself, and note any digressions. You will never improve what you are not aware needs fixing.

9. Weak opening. Engage your audience with a powerful, relevant opening that includes them. For example, “You have an awesome responsibility,” or “Congratulations on your company’s recent success.” Then focus on their needs: increasing sales, reducing errors, cutting overhead, expanding their market, increasing their digital footprint, or perfecting their sales presentations. Whatever your product can help your prospect do.

10. Weak closing. For your close, pick a strong, positive sentence that you absolutely want embedded in their minds. Your last words linger. Just like the PS in a sales letter, you do not want to introduce a new idea. This is a reinforcement of one of your main advantages or benefits; e.g., “Remember, 157 profitable quarters” or “99% of the Fortune 100 do business with us.”

11. Lack of specificity. Specificity builds your credibility and helps position you above your competition.

What is the number one crime against your credibility? It's a single, suddenly-popular buzzword that makes me feel like fingernails screeching on a blackboard every time I hear it. It's "stuff." It means debris, and your products are not. However, let's look at the others. "Thing" is not much better than...debris. Are there three things that will make you successful? Or is it three strategies, techniques, habits, ideas, philosophies, or action steps?

How about tons and bunches? Can you really get a "ton" of ideas? Do you leave the trade show with "bunches of business cards"? More likely it is three dozen.

You can't tell a prospect, "With our program, you will really grow your business." Instead, "There are no guarantees; however, our last three clients increased sales an average of 32% in seven months."

12. Misusing technology. Charles H. Green, co-author of *The Trusted Advisor*, tells about four advertising agencies bidding on a large account. Each group had two hours. The last team walked in and said, "We're ready to do exactly what the other three competing agencies have done. We can give you the 'Dance of a Thousand PowerPoint Slides,' but you have a choice. You can pretend you already hired us, and for the next two hours we can start brainstorming on your account. If you hire us, you've received two free hours of consultation; and if you don't, you've still had two hours free." This won them a very profitable account. They showed they could use the latest technology; but, more important, they had the confidence in their presentation skills that they didn't need it.

Avoid these "dirty dozen," and you're on your way to being a star of the sales world—delivering a dazzling performance every time.

Patricia Fripp helps individuals and companies who want the competitive edge that comes from powerful, persuasive presentations.