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STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS

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Your ability to communicate effectively is a key to success in life. Whether your interactions are professional or personal your communication skills help determine whether or not you achieve your goals. The fallacy associated with effective communicators is that they are *born communicators* - implying that strong communication skills are a natural talent and many times indicative of specific personality types (i.e. extroverted individuals). This is simply not true. By utilizing a variety of techniques, the communication process can be mastered by anyone committed to delivering an accurate and effective message.

Competition to be heard and understood is becoming increasingly difficult in a technologically advancing society. Information and the ability to convey it well should be a primary goal of any professional. Agribusiness professionals are no different. They recognize that agriculture is undergoing substantial changes -- changes that require a level of communication skills that can deliver improved client and consultative services.

It takes more than words to communicate. Skilled presenters recognize that content is but one element of a successful presentation. A solid presentation requires an integrated approach balancing behavioral, speech and environmental elements. If the appropriate balance is struck then the presenter achieves *believability*. Believability is critical because it gives credibility to the messenger and his/her message. Believability is achieved when verbal, vocal and visual elements of communication are delivered in a complementary fashion. Verbal elements refer to the content of the presentation; vocal factors relate to the quality of the voice including projection, intonation and resonance; and visual elements refer to posture, eye contact, gestures, dress and personal energy.

Albert Mehrabian's landmark study, forwarded in his book Silent Messages, concluded that each of these communication elements are important, but certain elements are more persuasive and influential than others when listeners are faced with inconsistent messaging. Inconsistency is the problem for most presenters -- meaning the information is not effectively conveyed because the delivery elements of the communication process are weak and distract from the key messages or content. Mehrabian found that the most influential element of communication is the visual aspect followed by vocal and verbal. Therefore, listeners predominantly believed visual cues over any other communication element when faced with inconsistent messaging.

Preparing for a presentation involves four steps: 1) defining your objective, 2) selecting a strategy that can deliver your defined objective, 3) profiling your audience and 4) matching your presentation to your audience. When developing a presentation, a storyboard is a helpful instrument to organize your thoughts and material.

A storyboard is sequenced according to required tasks and usually is arranged as follows: the definition of the objective, designing the presentation's close, creating an opening, outlining the content/body, creating visual aids and reference notes.

Ensure that you invest the appropriate amount of time in developing your opening and closing. Design the close first, as this is the most important part of the presentation. The conclusion is your presentation's destination. Your objectives need to be apparent in the close and should reflect your opening comments. The opening needs to address how your audience will benefit from your message, idea or recommendation. Provide an overview of your presentation that will direct your audience and highlight the key messages. Ensure that you define your call to action and determine what you want your audience to do as a result of your presentation.

The body of the presentation requires information 'chunking' that creates subsets of the whole. Once again, create a message statement for each conceptual chunk, sequence more significant concepts before minor ones, and present facts chronologically only when necessary. Organizing or chunking your information involves moving from the general to the specific. In other words, take a holistic approach by concentrating on the message and then the supporting logic and data.

Lastly, think of a business presentation as an opportunity to share what you know. Business presentations are not public speaking events even though they require similar skill sets. Avoid focusing on the performance aspects of the presentation and concentrate on your objective, messages and audience. Business presenters need to be relevant, clear and facilitators of discussion. Implementing these communication techniques and strategies will allow you to achieve these goals.