



The #1 Myth in Presenting

An oft-cited study supposedly proving "what you say" is less important than "how you say it" has been misinterpreted for decades.

In the 7 years since I wrote *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*, I've been conducting workshops based on the book for public interest audiences across North America. Attendees frequently share advice they've received from other trainers, and while much of it is useful, there are some wrong-headed ideas and one particularly persistent myth that should be put to rest.

As a general rule, beware any advice that specifies an absolute limit on words per slide, screen-time per slide, or total slides per presentation.



Albert Mehrabian, Ph.D.

(Please note: I am not referring here to presenting formats such as PechaKucha where 20 slides are displayed for 20 seconds each.) While I agree with the general principle that less is more, I've seen plenty of presentations that ignore any arbitrary limits and are still completely engaging.

And be especially wary if someone tells you, "It's not *what* you say, it's *how* you say it." Admittedly, there

is some truth in there: presenters who can look you in the eye and speak authoritatively will have more success than those who keep their noses in their notes and mumble in a monotone. But the research most often cited as proof that nonverbal cues overwhelm actual content has been widely and repeatedly misinterpreted.

In 1967, UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian conducted a study entitled, "Inference of attitudes from nonverbal communication in two channels." From a series of tests involving face-to-face communications, he concluded that 38% of communication is inflection and tone of voice, 55% is facial expression, and *only 7% is based on what you actually say.*

January 2013

The #1 Myth in Presenting

"How you say it" matters less than you think.

How Strategic Are Your Communications?

Join us this week and find out.



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.agoodmanonline.com and www.thegoodmancenter.com.

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an

Since then, many communications consultants and public speaking coaches have cited this study, and the results have been quoted so widely they are often referred to in shorthand as the 7%-38%-55% rule. If you take a closer look at Mehrabian's study, however, you'll see that its implications for interpersonal communications - presentations included - are extremely limited.

In Mehrabian's experiment, subjects were divided into two groups: "speakers" and "listeners." The speakers were instructed to say a single word, such as "dear" or "terrible," and the listeners were asked to determine how that speaker felt about them. The listeners had only that one word plus whatever they could observe in the speaker's delivery. In addition, the speakers and listeners were complete strangers, so there was no additional context for the listeners to draw on.

Given this set-up, you can see how the listeners would be actively looking for nonverbal cues, and also how someone can say "dear" and yet look like they consider the listener to be anything but. More importantly, consider how different this set-up is from a typical presentation, where there is context around the speaker, much more than one-word utterances to be decoded, and where the listener's objective is not related to the speaker's feelings.

Mehrabian has attempted to debunk the mythology that's grown up around his research. On his website, he posted the following: "Please note that this and other equations regarding relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable."

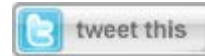
Nevertheless, the myth persists, and I heard the familiar refrain, "It's not what you say..." as recently as December. If you hear it, just remember that for presentations it's not an either/or proposition. What you say *and* how you say it are both important.

[^ back to top](#)

email to
andy@agoodmanonline.com.



FOLLOW ME ON TWITTER



To subscribe to this newsletter, [click here](#). To unsubscribe, [click here](#).



a goodman

GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

a goodman

444 North Larchmont Blvd.,

Suite 102

Los Angeles, CA 90004

323.464.3956

How Strategic Are Your Communications?

Join our Goodman Center webinar this week and find out.

Reaching out to your audience is one thing - connecting is another. If you look closely at classic success stories in the public interest sector, you'll see there are actually four points of connection between a good cause and the audience it needs to reach.

In our webinar ***Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter***, we'll examine three case studies, identify those four critical connecting points, and give you the tools to connect on all four every time you reach out to your target audience.

Our two-hour online course meets on January 11th and 18th from 9-10a Pacific (12n-1p Eastern) each day. Tuition is \$250 per student, and discounts are available to organizations that enroll three or more students. For more information and to register online, check out [The Goodman Center](#).

