Better CLE Presentations
Tips for Preparing and Presenting Effective CLE

by
Marilyn Bush LeLeiko
LawWriting.com

Preparation

Preparation is key for a good CLE presentation. What is your topic? Are you presenting a broad overview or a detailed examination of a specific issue? Who will be in your audience? Is anyone else presenting? What are their topics? How much time will you have?

Prepare an outline of your presentation. As you expand your outline, start putting together a resource list for attendees (articles, books, website URLs). Find concrete examples, stories, and cases that can help you make your points more effectively. Be practical. Include problems that attendees should watch out for and strategies they should consider.

Consider whether you should prepare a PowerPoint presentation. Use PowerPoint if visuals will help attendees follow what you are saying. If visuals won't help, you don't need to use PowerPoint.

Find the time to review your presentation. Practice won't make you perfect, but it will make you better. If you are using a PowerPoint presentation, try to practice in a conference room with the presentation projected on a screen (especially if you don't have a lot of experience with PowerPoint).

Written Handouts

Your handout should serve as a practical "take-away" resource attendees can refer to after your presentation. If appropriate, include sample documents, forms, and checklists. Offer to send attendees your handout in pdf format so that they can access it whenever they need it.

A list of other resources – articles, books, websites URLs, etc. – is also very helpful. Use hyperlinks to make the URLs "clickable".

Presentation Hints

Don't read your handout (or your PowerPoint slides) to your attendees. You will be more effective – and attendees are more likely to stay awake – if you talk to them rather than read. Try to vary your presentation, interspersing examples and stories. Also, vary your pacing and use pauses to allow attendees to absorb important information.

Find ways to involve the audience. It's not enough to offer to take questions (though that is important). Consider asking attendees to pair off and discuss a specific point. Present a written fact statement and ask that groups of 4 or 5 discuss how they would handle the situation. Turn an exercise into a competition. As an example, in my writing skills workshops I have groups work as teams on a conciseness exercise. The goal is to make a short writing sample as concise as possible. The competition always energizes the room.

Sometimes it's hard to get attendees to ask questions. Here are two suggestions that can help:

- Don't schedule your Q & A at the end of your session. That seems like the logical time, but we all know that by the last 5-10 minutes of a session, most attendees are packing up, mentally or literally. They don't want to ask a question and they may (internally, at least) groan when someone else does. In a half-day workshop, I usually stop for Q & A at least 30 – 45 minutes before the end of the workshop.

- Consider asking the group to break up into smaller groups, each containing 4-6 attendees. You need a "group leader" for each group (the person with the longest commute or the shortest last name, perhaps). The group leader's job is to keep track of the group's questions and report them back to you. You'll find you have a lot more questions and more discussions – and a more engaged group of attendees.

Repeat questions before answering them, if necessary, so that everyone can hear the questions. If a question is one that is not relevant to the entire group, consider answering the question at the end of your session.

PowerPoint Presentations

Preparation

- Don't use too many special effects, animations, transitions, fonts, or colors. The focus should be on your content, not on all the "bells and whistles" PowerPoint makes available. Just because you can do it doesn't mean you should do it.

- If you use animation or special effects, be prepared in case you unexpectedly need to use a backup computer that doesn't have the current version of PowerPoint. The older software might not support your animation or special effect. Prepare a presentation without animation and special effects and back it up onto a USB drive.

- Ten percent of the male population is colorblind. Some of them may be in your audience. These men can't distinguish green and red. To help them out, avoid those colors.

- Be consistent in your use of fonts. Try to use the same font set (for instance, regular and bold) throughout your presentation. Also, be consistent in your use of colors and slide formats.

- Make sure the font size is large enough for attendees to see. You shouldn't have to say "I know you can't see this slide, but . . ." Use at least a 24 point font – and 30 points is better.

- Use enough contrast between the text color and the background color so that attendees can easily read your text. What looks fine on your computer screen may not work when projected in the CLE meeting room.

- If you have a list, consider using "builds" that let you highlight each new item on the list as you start discussing it. Without builds, your attendees may read ahead and stop listening to you. With builds, you can focus attendees' attention on each list item as you discuss it.

    You don't need to use animation to use builds. You can just add an additional slide for each new point. The easiest way to prepare a series of slides that build a list is to

Preparation (continued)

prepare a slide with the entire list first. Duplicate that slide several times and then delete the list items as necessary so that each new slide has one additional list item. You can further help focus attention if you "gray out" the list items you've already discussed (just change the font color to gray or black).

- Slides should not be overloaded with text. Use fewer words and expand on the text in your talk.

- Keep your slide text away from the edges of your slides. The edges of your slides may not be visible to attendees (depending on the projector and setup).

- Use photos and graphics if helpful. If a graphic takes a long time to explain, consider simplifying it.

- When you've prepared all your slides, run spell check and correct any errors.

- If possible, try out your presentation using the equipment that you will be using for your CLE session, including your remote or wireless mouse. If you can't do that, at least check to see how your presentation looks in a conference room with the presentation projected onto a screen. From the back of the room, is your text readable? Are your fonts large enough? Is the contrast between text and background great enough? Uncover any problems while you have enough time to re-work your slides.

- Have a disaster plan in mind in case the projector doesn't work. If you are relying on your PowerPoint presentation as your outline, print the presentation so that you can present your CLE session even if the technology fails.

- When possible, don't give someone else's PowerPoint presentation without advance review and preparation.

Before the Presentation

- Just in case, put a backup copy of your presentation on a USB drive (or a few USB drives).

- Make sure you know how to work the projection equipment and your remote or wireless mouse. If possible, test everything in advance.

- If you will be using your own laptop, remember that your laptop's desktop may be visible at some point. Make sure no embarrassing or confidential files/filenames are visible. An uncluttered desktop is best. (Just move everything on your desktop to a file entitled "Desktop Files".)

Set-Up Hints/Helpful Equipment

- Get to the meeting room early so that you can check the setup and change it (if possible) to meet your needs. Check all the equipment before any attendee arrives.

- Your presentation is more professional if you don't have to turn away from your audience to see what is projected on the screen. Place your laptop so that you can see it from where you'll be sitting or standing. A quick glance at the laptop will ensure that the slide you are talking about is the one you are displaying.

  Some setups make it difficult to place your laptop where you can see it. An extension cable (to be precise, a monitor extension cable SVGA M/F) usually solves the problem. The cable runs from your laptop to the projector's cable. It should be part of your traveling kit for out-of-office CLEs.

- A remote control will allow you to move from slide to slide without being anchored right next to your laptop. The one I use – the Kensington Wireless Presenter or Kensington Wireless Presenter with Laser – has a USB receiver that plugs into a laptop's USB port. The remote allows me to move 50-60 feet away from the laptop and still control the presentation. I can remotely move one slide forward or one slide back; I can also black out the screen (the equivalent of hitting "B" in PowerPoint). This remote works on both PCs and Macs. No drivers are required. Kensington.com

During the Presentation

- Do not simply read your slides to your audience. Attendees can read faster than you can speak; you will more likely keep their attention if you are conversational.

- You may not need a slide for every point you make. Use the "black out" feature (hitting the "B" key in PowerPoint if you don't have a remote) when you want attendees to focus on you, not on the slide. Go back to your slides by hitting "B" again.

- If you use a laser pointer, make sure that it doesn't "dance" around the screen. Use it to make your point and then shut it off.

- Relax and enjoy connecting with your audience. You've done the work necessary to ensure a great presentation!

About the Author:

Marilyn Bush LeLeiko conducts CLE workshops in writing skills for lawyers and paralegals. During the summer, she conducts workshops for summer associates. Marilyn also conducts Effective Email programs for law office managers and staff. She has presented her programs at law firms, corporate legal departments, and government law offices throughout the country. To learn more, visit LawWriting.com.