U. S. Department of the Interior
Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs
Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development
Division of Economic Development

Tribal Economic Development Principles at a Glance Series

Making an Effective Business Presentation

This is the fifth in a series of economic development primers produced by the Division of Economic Development (DED), Indian Affairs Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED), to offer answers to fundamental questions about creating jobs and expanding economies in tribal communities.

If you would like to discuss business presentations in more detail, please contact the Division of Economic Development at (202) 219-0740.

What is meant by a "business presentation"?

A business presentation is an oral presentation made by a company spokesperson, sales person, or executive to a potential buyer of the company's goods or services, or to potential investors and partners. This kind of presentation can be formal, pre-arranged, and last for a scheduled period of time. Or, it can occur at a moment's notice when the person must present a convincing case for the business idea or need in just a few minutes and without the benefit of handouts or PowerPoint slides or other multi-media tools.

Why should representatives of tribal and American Indian- and Alaska Native-owned businesses care about how to make an effective business presentation?

The merits of most commercial products and services or business opportunities are not immediately obvious. They must be communicated in a compelling and interesting manner in order to make a sale, convince investors to provide capital, and/or acquire partners.

Additionally, most products and services are not unique, and tribal and Native American-owned businesses have plenty of competitors. Thus, a business presentation is one way to distinguish a business or product from its rivals.

What first steps should I take to design an effective business presentation?

The first step in designing an effective business presentation is to analyze the market audience you are trying to reach. Who is going to watch the presentation? What are their needs? Why should they care about your product or service? Will audience members have reasons to be skeptical about your product or service? What action do you want them to take?

What is the structure of an effective business presentation?

An effective business presentation speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of your audience. It tells a persuasive story, establishes your business expertise and credentials and those of your company, dispels any pre-existing doubts, sustains the listener's interest, lasts just long enough to make your case, and ends with a call for action. It focuses on a primary message supported with details and real-life examples. As support, third-party testimonials tend to resonate best.

How should I prepare to give a business presentation?

You should first prepare an outline of what you wish to say, or "pitch." You should practice making your pitch in accordance with the outline until it is engrained in your memory and can be delivered within the time you have been allotted. While you can use notes, you should never read directly from a script as this can cause listeners to conclude that you lack confidence in yourself or in your product or service. Since they are just as capable of reading the same script, they might also wonder why you do not skip the oral presentation in favor of handouts.

Tailor your presentation to those you are addressing. Do not use the same presentation for each audience.

How should I envision my role as speaker?

You should view yourself as a mentor who is there to help the listener's company overcome a commercial obstacle or enlarge its market share. You are not there to promote yourself. Rather, you are there to inform the listeners how your product or service will solve their problems or help them achieve their goals.

What are the most important parts of a business presentation?

The most important parts of a business presentation are the beginning and the end.

At the beginning, you must capture the audience's attention. You can do this by asking an intriguing question, polling the audience, or by making a bold or startling, declarative statement followed by a pause (for example: "I have a product that could increase your sales by 100% or more").

You should quickly establish your credibility with respect to the subject of the presentation. Avoid the temptation to spend too much time introducing your firm, how it came to be, and your relationship to it.

At the end, you must make a call to action. You must tell the listeners how to take the next step, whether that is ordering your company's product or service, contacting a representative of your company, beginning contract negotiations, or attending a meeting. Your call to action should be clear and unequivocal.

What should I keep in mind throughout my presentation?

You should remember to involve the audience and make eye contact, smiling where appropriate. Do not forget to thank the audience for their attendance and attention. Avoid use of acronyms and technical jargon unfamiliar to your listeners. A common complaint from audiences is that business presentations are too long. So keep your listeners' attention by making your pitch brief and to the point, and allow time for any questions.

How should I handle questions from the audience?

You should treat questions from the audience as an opportunity to understand and dispel concerns or skepticism. You should invite questions during the presentation instead of waiting until the end.

If your presentation is to a small audience, it is likely that you will be interrupted with questions early and often. Expect this, and do not allow it to fluster you. Being asked questions by your listeners means they are engaged and want more information about your product or service.

Whether your presentation is being made to a large audience or, informally, to a smaller one, you should anticipate questions beforehand and have answers ready for them.

What if the audience has no questions?

Depending upon time constraints, you can verbalize your own questions, such as "Perhaps you are asking yourself . . ." or "You might wonder why . . . ," and provide answers that may clear up common, but unspoken, misperceptions.

Should I move around during my presentation?

Even when they are equipped with a lectern, some speakers prefer to walk around during their presentations. This is appropriate if the audience will view it as natural or purposeful. For example, you may want to move closer to the audience in order to appear less formal and more personable. But, you should avoid doing this when it seems unnatural or is distracting.

A common failing among business presenters is the tendency to shift weight from one foot to the other, shuffle papers, or move from side to side. This will often cause the audience to focus on your nervousness rather than on your message. If it is better for you to stand in one position, then use your hands to emphasize points in your presentation.

Should I use PowerPoint or other multimedia tools?

PowerPoint and other multimedia tools have become mainstays of most business presentations. They can either add or detract from your message depending upon how they are used. PowerPoint slides are now used for more than just oral presentations. Potential investors often request beforehand an electronic version of your slides, sometimes referred to as a "deck."

Used well, slides can sharpen your message, particularly when they contain graphics that are dramatic or memorable to illustrate points in your pitch. They can reduce a complex concept to a single, understandable image. But, they are meant to be visual tools, not the focus of a presentation.

Misused, they can be boring. A common misuse of these tools is for the speaker to retreat to the back of the room or among the audience and narrate what is already printed on the slides. Another common misstep occurs when the speaker loads each slide with a large block of text, or "wall of words." Slide headers and comments should be in bullet form, complementing any image that is displayed. They should act as your cues rather than as substitutes for multi-paragraph handouts.

Tips for effective slides:

- Avoid information overload by weeding out from your presentation extraneous words and images. Use slides only to emphasize key points and display only information that is essential.

- Try not to use more than three bullets per slide. Place titles and the most important information at the top of each slide.

- Recognize that persons sitting in the back of room may have trouble seeing words on the bottom of slides.

- Use as little punctuation as possible and avoid inserting words with all letters capitalized.

- Use readable fonts, avoid white backgrounds, and choose images, charts, and graphs instead of text wherever possible.

- Never skip over slides. This tells listeners that you either miscalculated the time it would require to deliver your message or that you organized the slides haphazardly.

- Limit the number of slides you use. You should plan your presentation on paper first, deleting those slides that are not entirely relevant or which do not add value. A rule of thumb is to use no more than 20 slides.

Depending upon your audience and comfort with social media, you can even use other multi-media tools to prompt audience participation and interaction. You can include a Twitter feed, "tweetable" statements, and a #hashtag to encourage real-time discussions online.

With respect to technical issues, expect the worst and be prepared. Know in advance how to operate with ease the computer, projector, microphone, and other technology you will use for your presentation. You also should practice loading, setting up, and running these devices. And, always bring a back-up thumb-drive or CD for your slides.

With respect to a formal presentation, should I check out the presentation venue beforehand?

If possible, you should visit the presentation site ahead of time to acquaint yourself with your audio-visual equipment. Don't forget to check the room temperature as you will want your audience to be comfortable.

Should I show a company video?

Running a company video is discouraged because it can appear to be an infomercial or clumsy substitute for a real conversation. You should have an informative website that people can consult for further information about your company. Include the website address on your last slide.

Should I use humor in my presentation?

Because they involve contracts, jobs, and future commercial relationships, business presentations are serious, and a serious subject demands a serious approach. While humor may be appropriate and effective in other situations, using it in a pitch is risky. Too many attempts at comedy can trivialize or distract from your presentation's main focus, or leave your audience with the wrong impression of you and your company.

Does the Division of Economic Development provide hands-on training in making an effective business presentation?

Yes. The IEED Division of Economic Development organizes and co-sponsors conferences throughout the year to link executives of tribal- and Native American-owned businesses with potential federal, state, and private sector customers and partners. These events sometimes feature business presentation training sessions followed by presentation competitions judged by business graduate school professors, representatives of prime vendors, and others. These activities aim to sharpen the ability of Native American business men and women to compete effectively in the marketplace.

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