GUIDELINES FOR ORGANIZING AND CONDUCTING TRAINING SESSIONS

Whether you're conducting a small in-house training session or a larger event, here are some ideas to help you attract participants and make them comfortable:

• Choose the location carefully. The room should be large enough to comfortably accommodate tables, displays and equipment as well as all the people, but should not dwarf the crowd.

• Provide food and drinks. Coffee, tea, water, healthy snacks and traditional foods add a nice touch, even for small in-house training sessions.

• Provide good handouts. Consider creating a packet for each participant. Items to go into the packet may include one-page fact sheets, a printout of any PowerPoint presentations, a brochure about your agency or service, a business card or contact information for each speaker, and an evaluation form. Packets need not be elaborate – photocopies and inexpensive folders work fine.

• If possible, offer continuing education credits (CEU's) that various providers can use to meet their licensing and/or certification requirements. This can be an important draw if you want to attract as many people as possible to your training sessions.

Preparation for trainings and presentations

Most public speaking pros will agree: The first, and most important, key to an effective presentation is adequate preparation. Start by asking yourself what you want your audience to take with them when they leave. What are the main points you want to make? Use these to create an outline.

You will want to pay particular attention to your introduction and your conclusion. The introduction is your "first impression" for your audience; it should get their attention and interest, reveal the topic of your presentation and establish credibility (why the audience should listen to you). An effective conclusion will signal the end of the presentation, reinforce your message and provide a sense of closure.

Here are some more pointers for the preparation stage:

• If you're having trouble coming up with an outline, try writing your conclusion or summary first. It should emphasize the most important points you plan to make. Once you have visualized these points, it should be easier to build a presentation around them.

• Prepare note cards summarizing your major points. But use your notes sparingly. Avoid the temptation to write out your entire presentation beforehand, or you will invariably give in to the further temptation to read your presentation.

• Start your preparation early. If you're like most people, you'll probably be making small changes right up until you walk to the front of the room, but don't wait till the very last minute to start planning your presentation.

• Practice, practice, practice. Rehearse your entire presentation out loud at least once before you get up in front of your audience, even if your "practice" audience is only your partner, your best friend or your cat.

• On the other hand, don't memorize. Rehearsing is one thing; committing the entire presentation to memory and performing it by heart is another. You need to present, not recite.

• Choose your outfit with care. You will want to dress professionally but comfortably. This is not the time to break in a scratchy new suit or tight new shoes.

Visual aids

While effective presentations do not require visual aids, a few well-placed visuals can add clarity and impact. For example, statistical information is easier for your audience to understand when presented visually through charts and graphs. More importantly, visuals can also help your audience stay focused and retain information. Examples of visual aids include posters, overheads, PowerPoint slides, computer graphics, videos and actual objects. Here are some suggestions for using visual elements effectively:

• Keep it simple. A simple visual aid used well is much more effective than a complex one used poorly.

• New technology is wonderful, but don't break in new equipment 15 minutes before the presentation starts. And whatever you do, don't have rented equipment scheduled to arrive 10 minutes before you speak. Check out everything in advance.

• Visuals should add to the presentation, not distract from it. Make sure your presentation has enough substance to equal your visuals so the audience focuses on your message. When the session is over, you want the audience discussing your ideas, not the special effects.

• Make sure your visuals are clearly visible to the entire audience. Everyone, including those in the back of the room, must be able to see, read and understand each visual.

• Speak to your audience, not your PowerPoint. Avoid the temptation to constantly look at or read from your PowerPoint script.

● Avoid distributing objects or handouts during your presentation. This distracts the audience and reduces their attentiveness. Distribute handouts either before your begin, or at the end of your presentation. One advantage of distributing handouts beforehand is that people will know they're getting a printout of your PowerPoint presentation, and they will listen to you rather than feeling the need to furiously jot down notes.

● Rehearsing includes the entire presentation. If you will be using visuals, rehearse these along with the spoken portion of your presentation.

● Be prepared for disaster. Projector bulbs can burn out unexpectedly, posters can fall down and videos can jam in the machine. Always prepare an alternate plan so you do not have to depend on your visuals or other props to carry the presentation.

● Remember that visuals can only add to a good presentation; they cannot rescue a poorly developed one. Do not put all your time and effort into your visuals at the risk of ignoring adequate preparation of the message itself.

Engaging your audience

The good news is, most people come to a training seminar or workshop prepared to have a profitable experience and learn something, and they bring with them a great deal of goodwill toward those they listen to. So relax, and follow these suggestions when giving a presentation:

● Begin with a smile. This conveys to the audience that you are well prepared and have something worthwhile to say.

● Pick one or two people easily visible to you and "speak" to them. This will help you keep in touch with your audience minus the panic that can set in if you're focusing on a whole sea of people. If some people in the audience seem especially attentive, focus on them. Your audience won't know the difference.

● Keep it brief. The proper length of your presentation will depend on the subject, but don't feel you need to ramble to fill in "space."

● Keep an eye on how well your audience is following your presentation. Are they attentive? What about body language? Are they fidgeting or checking their watches? Taking naps? (Snoring is a bad sign.) If the audience seems distracted, you may need to pick up the pace a bit.

● In your conclusion, call for definite action on the part of your audience. Give concrete suggestions on what they can do to support your ideas or learn more about the subject.

● Leave time for a question and answer period. This allows you to provide more details or clarify major points in a setting with high audience attention.