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The Craft of Scientific Presentations: Critical Steps to Succeed and Critical Errors to Avoid

By Michael Alley
New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003, 241 pages, \$29.95

[Lectures] depend entirely for their value on the manner in which they are given. It is not the matter, not the subject, so much as the man [or the woman].

—Michael Faraday (1864:379)

For marketing academicians, scholarly presentations are a must. During the course of our careers, we all make presentations at conferences, while on job interviews, to obtain grants, or even just to teach our classes. And yet, despite the importance of these lectures, many scholars receive little instruction regarding how they can improve their presentations.

The Craft of Scientific Presentations: Critical Steps to Succeed and Critical Errors to Avoid by Michael Alley is a beneficial read for marketing academics at all levels—from the doctoral student preparing for a first seminar presentation to a seasoned presenter looking to polish his or her presentation style. The text provides scholars with a framework to help them become more effective presenters. Alley is a faculty member at Virginia Tech in the Mechanical Engineering Department. He also holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

Alley spends a considerable amount of space discussing the types of information a scientist may choose to present. This material is relevant to marketing, as one often hears that a substantial lag exists between the time one submits an article to a top marketing journal and the article's appearance in print. Therefore, many marketing academicians assert that the fastest means of disseminating "cutting edge" marketing research is to prepare a scholarly presentation. However, presenting innovative research holds many potential pitfalls for the scholar. For instance, a speaker has one chance to say things correctly, while the audience is captive to the speaker's pace and has no chance to look up background information.

The Craft contains an excellent overview of the trade-offs between presenting the information one understands best and presenting information that pushes the boundaries of one's field. For instance, Alley notes that Linus Pauling showed "audacity" in his presentations. Although Pauling at times made assertions that proved to be untrue, he was often close enough to the truth that he received credit for numerous discoveries. As Alley states, "Linus Pauling risked much, yet reaped much from his risks" (p. 82). The physicist Niels Bohr's presentations, on the other hand, illustrate the risks of pushing the boundaries. In Alley's estimation, Bohr was a great scientist, but a lousy presenter who hurt his professional reputation by presenting groundbreaking material in a confusing manner.

(One fascinating aspect of *The Craft* is Alley's stream of references to presentations by great scientists (e.g., Bohr, Einstein, and Feynman.) To a marketing academic struggling to make reliability and validity comprehensible to undergraduates, it will be heartening to read that Marie Curie and J. Robert Oppenheimer also labored to clarify their lectures. To a nervous presenter, it should be encouraging to read that Nikola Tesla practiced each of his high-voltage experiments a minimum of 20 times before performing them in public.

Alley divides his book into four major topics: (1) speech, (2) structure, (3) visual aids, and (4) delivery. Readers will find that Alley offers useful advice on each of these four subjects. However, the suggestions in the structure and visual aids chapters are much easier to apply than are the suggestions regarding speech and delivery.

The discussion of structure is outstanding; we believe that almost all marketing scholars could learn something from this chapter. Alley asserts that a presentation's structure determines how much the audience learns. Structure is particularly important to presentations because the audience at a presentation does not have the opportunity to review ambiguous information. Alley's discussion helps explain how a presenter can balance the need to explain highly complex information (in a short period of time) with the audience's need to understand such information.

To orient the audience, Alley suggests that one should begin a presentation in "the shallows" (at a point where all of the audience members can understand the material). Then, after orienting the audience, he or she may "dive" into more complex details. The key, however, is for the presenter to come back repeatedly to the shallows during a presentation; Alley asserts that a presenter should take time to reorient the audience at the beginning of each major topic in the presentation.

Although Alley concedes that a presenter following this strategy may lose some audience members during the deepest "dives," his suggestion provides a practical means to present highly complex information to a diverse audience. Marketing academicians who work on unfamiliar issues or who use novel methods will find much value in

Alley's discussion. For instance, mathematical modelers who find themselves presenting to audiences composed of nonmodelers could gain much from reading Alley's discussion. Furthermore, qualitative marketing researchers preparing to discuss topics such as ethnography could benefit from this information as well.

Most readers are also likely to find Alley's discussion of visual aids to be easily applicable to their presentations. However, the information concerning visuals is much more practical and less philosophical than is Alley's coverage of structure. (This difference is logical, however, when one considers the different nature of the two topics.)

Alley asserts that effective visuals are vital to a presentation—as we remember just 10 percent of what we hear and just 20 percent of what we read. However, we remember 50 percent of information that we *both* hear and read. *The Craft* delves into very specific instructions for building effective slides. For instance, Alley mentions that a yellow background with black letters is the easiest to read. (This is why many highway signs use the yellow-black combination.) However, “hot” colors such as yellow tend to agitate an audience; on the other hand, blue and green backgrounds are more soothing and tend to calm listeners.

Although Alley's coverage of speech and delivery is not as strong as is his coverage of structure and visual aids, both chapters contain valuable information. For instance, the speech chapter includes an excellent discussion of how presenters can use analogies, examples, and stories to clarify arcane points for the audience. (An understanding of this material could help many academics eliminate weaknesses not only in their presentations but in their journal articles as well.) Alley also stresses the need to consider the audience while planning a presentation. This point will no doubt “ring true” for marketing professors accustomed to emphasizing the importance of customer satisfaction to their students.

In regard to delivery, Alley provides practical advice on how to use one's voice, movements, stance, and attire to improve credibility with an audience. (He will probably get some chuckles from the reader when he notes that academics do not have a reputation as fashion plates.)

In the end, if neither the speech nor the delivery chapter seems as satisfying as the structure and visual aids discussions, perhaps this is again due to the nature of the two topics. We have all seen effective presenters who acted as flamboyant “performers”—presenters who behaved as though they were on a Broadway stage. On the other hand, many presenters who are not demonstrative are also very effective at explaining their ideas. In the end, each reader will have to adopt the style of speech and delivery that best suits him or her.

Although Alley teaches engineering, readers will find that the book is thoroughly applicable to marketing presentations. In fact, *The Craft* is relevant to any academician who wants to improve his or her presentations. (One

may also learn a bit about submarines, volcanoes, and other topics from the presentations Alley includes as examples.)

In addition to providing valuable information, *The Craft* is easy to read. The text flows, even when it delves into considerable detail. (Alley obviously learned his lessons well while studying creative writing.) As befits a book on presentations, *The Craft* contains more than 40 illustrations; these visuals greatly enhance the reader's understanding. Finally, for those interested in more details, Alley provides approximately 15 pages of references.

In his conclusion, Alley challenges the reader with a memorable (and even inspiring) note:

If there were one piece of advice about presentations that I could whisper into the ears of every scientist and engineer, it would be to aim higher. In other words, do not be content to present in the staid fashion to which so many presenters resign themselves. Rather, for your audience, purpose, and occasion, you should strive to craft a presentation that is truly worth your audience's time, a presentation that your audience will not forget. (P. 207)

Marketing scholars who wish to accept this challenge will find that Alley provides a valuable set of principles for improving any presentation.

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Market Orientation, Corporate Culture and Business Performance

By Satyendra Singh
Ashgate Publishing, UK: Athenaeum, 2004, 200
pages, \$94.95

Based on the author's sound research, the book is well-written and summarizes a rich stream of literature on market orientation. It links a new conceptualization of market orientation to business performance. The book is based on a well-designed and executed survey of small and medium-sized firms in the British machine tool industry.