



From All About You to All About Them

By Cliff Atkinson (published July 15, 2003 at www.MarketingProfs.com)

Is your next important presentation a match with the executive you want to persuade? Your answer may make a bottom line difference to your business, according to the results of a 2-year study by the research firm **Miller-Williams**.

"More than 50% of presentations to executives are a mismatch to the decision-making style of the executive," said Robert B. Miller, chairman of Miller-Williams and co-author of the upcoming book *Paths to Persuasion: How to Influence the Five Styles of Today's Decision Makers* (Warner Books, 2004). So if you've lost business because you didn't get the executive decision you wanted, "it's probably not because of your content, but because of the way it was presented."

The Miller-Williams study interviewed 1,684 executives across a broad range of professions in upper middle management and above. The results identified a fundamental change in traditional communications roles between presenters and executive audiences.

"Today, the roles have shifted," Miller said. In the past a presenter may have had more information than the executive, but in the age of the Internet, "an executive probably knows as much about your product as you, and probably more about your competitor."

Since executives no longer rely on presenters as primary sources of information, the burden has shifted to presenters to prove they offer something of value to justify getting an executive's time. "You have the privilege of being in front of executives," said Miller. "You get one shot. You need to know what they're thinking - their challenges and issues. It's not about your product."

For many presenters, this means a major shift in mindset from a template presentation centered around their own company's products and services, to a customized presentation centered around their audience's challenges and issues. "The key take-away here is that it's not about you; it's about them," Miller said.

It also means a shift away from presenters expressing their individual style of communicating, to adapting individual presentations to the audience's style of decision-making. "It's not the way I like to present; it's the way the decision-maker wants to see the information," he said. "If you're not doing this, you're losing the other side of the desk."

The Miller-Williams study identified five distinctive executive decision-making styles that they labeled *charismatic*, *thinker*, *skeptic*, *follower* and *controller*. Each decision-making style processes information in different ways, and demands a different strategy from the presenter.

For example, the charismatic decision-making style tends to get very excited by new ideas, and accounted for 25% of all executives polled. For this audience "the biggest mistake a presenter can make is to join in the enthusiasm," according to Miller. Instead, he recommends keeping the presentation grounded in reality, which will earn the respect of the executive. On the other hand, the follower style makes decisions predominantly based on proven results, and accounted for 36% of executives. For this audience, a presenter needs to prominently feature testimonials and case studies.

Although it's important to understand the characteristics of all five decision-making styles, the process of building a presentation doesn't have to be complex. "This is basically a 2-step system,"

according to Miller. "First, identify who the presenter is. Second, given this is their style, how do I tailor the information?"

The first step of identification requires advance research and legwork. Miller says his own team relies on getting good coaching beforehand from others who are familiar with the decision-making style of the executive. The second step is a matter of understanding the specific characteristics of the decision-making style, and tailoring a full range of presentation techniques and tools to fit the style. For more details on the five decision-making styles, and various ways to address them, see the Miller-Williams Harvard Business Review article [here](#).

Miller's tailored presentation approach obviously takes more time and money than the standard template approach, and the decision to invest resources into presentation development depends on the value of the business at stake. This next-generation presentation approach requires both the development of adaptable communication skills, plus the effective use of an integrated suite of communication tools that includes whiteboards, PowerPoint, video, brochures, websites, detailed supporting documentation, and other business media.

Take this quick litmus test to determine the orientation of your next important presentation: Count the number of your slides titled something like: "About Us", "Our Mission", "Our Strengths", "Our Differentiators", and "Our Products and Services". Then compare it to the number of slides titled something like "About You", "Your Mission", "The Problems You're Facing" and "How We Can Help You Solve Your Problems."

Is your presentation All About You or All About Them?

If you center around that single point, and start re-orienting your presentation from presenter-centered to audience-centered, you could make the match that helps you get the executive decision you want and win you the business you need.

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