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Jerry Weissman

**CAPTURING  
YOUR AUDIENCE  
IMMEDIATELY**

(and You are Off to a Great Presentation!)



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FINANCIAL TIMES

# Capturing Your Audience Immediately (and You are Off to a Great Presentation!)

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Picture your audience at the start of your presentation. Imagine a group of potential customers who've come to hear you give a presentation about your company's newest product, drifting into a meeting room one by one, sipping their coffee, checking their Blackberries or iPhones. Or a banker in a wood-paneled office, sitting behind a tall stack of documents, who must decide whether or not to lend your start-up money for expansion. Or, a roomful of institutional investors in an elegant hotel banquet room, wondering how the NASDAQ is doing at that very moment in time.

Where are their minds? Chances are, not on you, not at the start of your presentation. Chances are they are thinking about an urgent message on their handhelds, the prior loan applicant, the mercurial NASDAQ, their next appointment, the report that's overdue, or the fight they just had with their significant other.

If you were to launch into your presentation at full speed, describing your product, service, or technology, you would vault ahead of your audience, and they would be forced to catch up. *Don't make them think!*

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You can capture your audience immediately with an Opening Gambit, a short statement to seize their attention (and simultaneously, to help you launch into your presentation in a comfortable, conversational manner).

Let's explore seven proven options you can use to craft your next Opening Gambit.

## 1. The Question

One excellent way to open a presentation is with a question directed at the audience. A well-chosen, relevant question evokes an immediate response, involves the audience, breaks down barriers, and gets the audience thinking about how your message applies to them.

Scott Cook, the founding CEO of Intuit Software, used an Opening Gambit Question to powerful effect. Prior to Intuit's public offering, Scott appeared at the Robertson, Stephens and Company Technology Investment Conference in San Francisco. Here's how he began his presentation:

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin today's presentation with a question. How many of you balance your checkbooks? May I see a show of hands?" Naturally, almost everybody's hand went up.

"Okay. Now, how many of you *like* doing it?" Everybody's hand went down. There were chuckles in the room, and everyone was listening to Scott Cook.

Scott continued, "You're not alone. Millions of people around the world hate balancing their checkbooks. We at Intuit have developed a simple, easy-to-use, inexpensive new personal finance tool called Quicken that makes balancing checkbooks easy."

The rhetorical question can be an excellent icebreaker, as long as it's both provocative and relevant to your audience.

## 2. The Factoid

An Opening Gambit Factoid is a simple, striking statistic or factual statement: a market growth figure, or a detail about an economic, demographic, or social trend with which your audience may not be familiar. This factoid must be closely related to the main themes of your presentation, and to your Point B. The more unusual, striking, and surprising your factoid, the better.

## 3. The Retrospective/Prospective View

Think of this approach as “That was then; this is now.” A retrospective (backward) or prospective (forward) look allows you to grab your audience's attention by moving them in one direction or another, away from their present, immediate concerns: that urgent message on the Blackberry or iPhone, the mercurial NASDAQ, or that fight with their significant other.

For example, you could refer to the way things used to be done, the way they are done now, and the way you project their being done in the future. The contrast can highlight the value of your company's product or service offerings, thereby framing an effective lead-in to your presentation's main themes and your Point B.

A technology company can quickly capture the evolving power of its solution by showing the speed and capabilities of its products five years ago (a lifetime in the high-tech world), the vastly improved speed and capabilities of today, and the still-greater speed and capabilities of the new line of products that will be going on sale in six months' time.

## 4. The Anecdote

By an Opening Gambit Anecdote, I do *not* mean a joke. I like a good joke as much as anyone, but my professional advice to you, and to every single person I coach, is never to tell a joke in a presentation. No one can predict its success or failure. Even if it does get a laugh, in most cases, it will distract from rather than enhance your persuasive message.

An anecdote is a *very* short story, usually one with a human-interest angle. Its effectiveness as an Opening Gambit lies in our natural tendency to be interested in and care about other people. An anecdote creates immediate identity and empathy with your audience. An anecdote is a simple and effective way to make an abstract or potentially boring subject come to life.

Newspapers and magazines regularly use anecdotes to capture their readers' attention. Just look in today's paper. You're sure to find at least one example of an Anecdote in the opening paragraph. Every professional writer knows how well it works.

## 5. The Quotation

Another option is the Opening Gambit Quotation. That doesn't mean a quotation from William Shakespeare, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, or even Tom Peters . . . unless one of them said something about your company. But if you can provide an endorsement or positive comment about yourself, your products, or your services from *The Wall Street Journal* or the industry press, the quotation provides relevant value. An endorsing quotation can capture your audience's interest and give you credibility at the outset of your presentation.

Please resist the temptation to go to your local bookstore or library and get one of those *Ten Million Quotations for All Occasions* books.

Most often, *all* those quotations turn out to be inappropriate for *any* occasion.

## 6. The Aphorism

An aphorism, or a familiar saying, can make for an excellent Opening Gambit. But be sure to select one that relates naturally and credibly to your main theme, and to your Point B.

Here is an example of an Opening Gambit Aphorism: A biotechnology company, being formed by the merger of three smaller companies with related sciences in cancer research, launched their presentation with the following: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” The original axiom from Euclid, the founder of geometry, is “The whole is *equal* to the sum of its parts,” but the biotech presenters gave the familiar saying a little twist. In doing so, they instantly identified the synergies that the new company would enjoy by combining competencies and resources.

## 7. The Analogy

The final option, the Opening Gambit Analogy, is one of the most popular and most effective. An analogy is a comparison between two seemingly unrelated items.

A well-crafted analogy is an excellent way of explaining anything that is arcane, obscure, or complicated. If your business deals with products, services, or systems that are technologically complex or that require specialized knowledge to understand, look for a simple analogy that can allow audiences to grasp the essence of the story.

The simpler and clearer the analogy, the better. If you were trying to sell investors on a company that had developed improved software for data network management, you might explain your business by using a twist on a familiar comparison: “Think of us as the people who

repair the potholes on the information superhighway. We plan to collect a toll from every driver who travels on our turnpike!”

## Compound Opening Gambits

You can actually combine some of the preceding options for your Opening Gambit.

### Linking to Point B

To make the opening of your presentation as effective as possible, you need to do more than capture the interest of your audience. The optimal Opening Gambit goes further by linking to your Point B.

In every one of the preceding examples, the presenters continued beyond the Opening Gambit, and then hopped, skipped, and jumped along a path that concluded with Point B. To do the same, you’ll need two additional stepping-stones: the *Unique Selling Proposition (USP)* and the *Proof of Concept*.

### USP

The USP is a succinct summary of your business, the basic premise that describes what you or your company does, makes, or offers. Think of the USP as the “elevator” version of your presentation: how you’d pitch yourself if you stepped into an elevator and suddenly saw that hot prospect you’d been trying to buttonhole. But please, make it a four-story elevator ride, not a 70-story trip!

The USP should be one or, at most, two sentences long. One of the most common complaints about presentations is “I listened to them for 30 minutes, and I *still* don’t know what they do!” The USP is what they do.

Remember Dan Warmenhoven’s opening: “Our company, Network Appliance, makes a product called a file server. A file server

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does one thing and does it well: It manages data on networks.” A very clear, concise USP.

## Proof of Concept

Proof of Concept is a single telling point that validates your USP. It gives your business instant credibility. The Proof of Concept is optional. Sometimes you can start with the Opening Gambit, link through the USP, and then go directly to Point B without the extra beat.

It is a valuable beat nonetheless, and when you do choose to include the Proof of Concept, you have a number of options. For example, you can use a significant sales achievement: “We sold 85,000 copies of this software the first day it was available”; a prestigious award: “*Business Week* picked our product as one of the top 10 of the year”; or an impressive endorsement: “When an IBM vice president tried our product, he told me he’d give anything if only IBM could have invented it.”

Think of your *Opening Gambit*, your *USP*, your *Proof of Concept*, and your *Point B* as a string of connected dynamic inflection points. Once you’ve segued smoothly through each of them at the start of your presentation, the heart of your argument will be primed for your discussion. You will have *grabbed* your audience’s attention, and they will be very clear about what you want them to do.

When you power-launch your presentation with your *Opening Gambit*, your *USP*, your *Proof of Concept*, and your *Point B*, your audience will have no doubt about where they’re going. Now it’s time for you to tell them how you intend to *navigate* them there.

## Tell ‘em What You’re Gonna Tell ‘em

The prior dynamic inflection points will prime your audience, but do you want to now dive directly into the body of your presentation? Do

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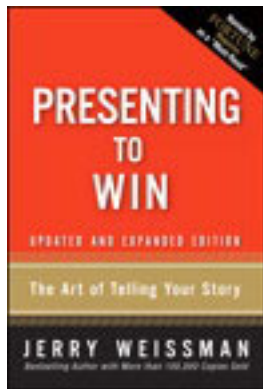
you want to start drilling deeply into the first of the clusters you selected? Not quite yet. I suggest that first you take a moment to give your audience a *preview* of the outline of your major ideas.

The technique for helping your audience become oriented and track the flow of your ideas is the classic *Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em*. You can also think of it as the *forest view*.

By providing your audience with a *road map* and a *forecast* of the time, you are giving them a *plan* and a *schedule*. These four italicized nouns have a least-common-denominator noun: *management*. Once again, you're sending the subliminal message of *Effective Management*.

You can now proceed to fulfill your forecast by telling 'em what you promised. That is, move through each of your clusters in greater detail, putting flesh on the sturdy bones of your structure.

In most presentations, this is in the Summary slide; in an IPO road show, it's in the Investment Highlights slide. In both cases, it's a mirror of its predecessor from the beginning of the presentation. This mirroring, this linking of the preview and the summary, serves to bookend the presentation. This also creates a thematic resolution that neatly ties together the entire presentation. Express that resolution with a final restatement of your Point B. The last words your audience should hear is your call to action.



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by Jerry Weissman,  
*Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story,  
Updated and Expanded Edition*  
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