

Presenting Off the Cuff

You're in an initial meeting with a client when suddenly he says: You know what? I think my boss has a few minutes and I know he'd like to hear what you have to say. Why don't you come with me and you can give him a presentation right now? Gulp! This was supposed to be just a getting-to-know-you meeting. You haven't prepared a presentation and you certainly don't feel prepared to face the decision maker with an off-the-cuff performance. What do you do?



First, don't rush to answer, advises Lilyan Wilder, a speaking consultant to broadcast correspondents at several major networks and author of *7 Steps to Fearless Speaking* (John Wiley & Sons, 1999). Instead, take a deep breath and hold onto an object – your memo pad, the edge of a chair, a pen – and plant your feet firmly on the floor to help you get grounded. Then acknowledge the question with an answer such as: I'd welcome the opportunity to speak with Bob.

Next, begin thinking about two things: your objective and a structure. What do you want to accomplish with this impromptu presentation? And what will be the beginning, middle and end of your presentation? "Concentrate on these two steps," says Wilder. "Keep concentrating on them until they materialize."

It also helps to do some preparation in advance, even when you don't think you'll be asked to give a presentation. Wilder advises that before every sales call you ask yourself: If I'm suddenly asked to perform today, what will I say? Sketch out a presentation in your head, keeping in mind the objective and structure. That way off-the-cuff presentations won't seem so intimidating.

Doing a short speaking exercise once a day is another way you can prepare ahead of time. Wilder recommends opening a book and choosing a word at random. Then immediately start talking for 60 seconds on that topic. The more you do it, the easier it will be and the better equipped you'll feel to talk in public when suddenly called on to do so. "Your ability to think on your feet is like a muscle, and like a muscle it can be developed," says Wilder. "This exercise will help develop your muscle."

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[Back to Cover](#)