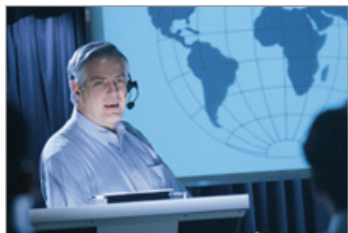


How to Create and Deliver Business Presentations for an Asian Audience

By Angela DeFinis



Being able to deliver strong presentations is a critical factor for successfully doing business in Asia. Communicating strategy, prioritizing initiatives, achieving goals, and selling to customers all require exceptional communication and speaking skills.

Developing effective presentation skills is the foundation for success in today's global business environment. This includes not only being well organized and prepared to express ideas in a compelling way, but also understanding the unique cultural requirements of each country and adapting presentation skills and behaviors accordingly.

Since many companies today have offices worldwide, being aware of cultural differences when it comes to presenting is crucial. The expectation for American companies doing business abroad is that American cultural norms and values play an important role in how business is conducted. But while American norms drive business practices and behavior, prudent companies also pay close attention to the culture and environment of the host country.

For American companies to thrive overseas, it's vital that their employees prepare and deliver presentations that combine the standard best practices of speech making with cultural awareness and sensitivity. This ensures that the presentations given in a particular country will combine the best of both worlds and achieve the greatest business impact.

The Challenge

When presenting to people in other countries, not only do speakers have to focus on content, language, delivery skills, and audience interaction, but they also must contend with different cultural expectations. The good news is that by following and slightly adapting the core business presentation skills used in the U.S., speakers can deliver a presentation to an overseas audience that highlights their expertise, builds a connection with the audience, and prompts them to take action on key messages—all while achieving company goals, reducing risk, and creating opportunities for growth.

Since many American companies do business in Asia (mainly China, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and India), learning the nuances of presenting to people in this part of the world is crucial. But first, a word of caution: The term "Asia" is broad, and each region and/or country within Asia has its own presentation subtleties, much like how different regions of the United States have their own unique defining traits.

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Even if we break it down country by country, it's important to remember that not every single Chinese businessperson, for example, behaves, thinks, and perceives things the same way. A group of Chinese executives will likely view things differently than a group of Chinese engineers or Chinese programmers. So the goal of this article is not to provide sweeping generalizations of a culture and set them in stone; rather, it's to give some broad range insight into a particular audience so speakers can adapt their presentation and delivery as needed.

People who work for an American company and do business overseas have a sincere desire to present their ideas professionally and in a way that does not offend the other culture. This requires that speakers use the core presentation skills they've learned and honed while taking into account the cultural differences and showing respect for others. In other words, the American brand of presenting—complete with broad gestures, lively animation, and compelling stories—is adaptable.

Unfortunately, when it comes to presenting in Asia, sometimes people are looking for a way out of using the core speaking skills. They say such things as, "Presenting like this would never work in China," "The Japanese have much different expectations from their business presenters," and "People in Singapore are much too reserved to appreciate these techniques."

The fact is that all the presentation skills taught through DeFinis Communications will work in other countries if they are delivered appropriately. Everyone in every culture appreciates well-organized content and materials. No one likes someone who stands up, looks unprepared, and rambles. Good presentation skills are universal; it's simply a matter of adapting those skills when speaking in Asia.

These universal speaking principles provide a blueprint of how people connect and communicate in general. So no matter where someone is speaking, there's no need to radically change the principles, because good communication is good communication all over the world. Yes, it has its own particulars based on cultural norms and values, but everyone knows when someone is being arrogant, impatient, or intolerant just as they know when someone is being flexible, open, or giving. Plain and simple: People worldwide know good presentations.

These skills are not unique to one presentation setting. Whether someone is presenting to a small group, on the

main stage, at a video conference, or one-on-one, these skills are portable; they go with the speaker no matter what the scenario or situation. There may be different techniques to employ and cultural nuances to consider, but anyone can confidently apply the core set of skills to any culture and any speaking situation.

The following are the key guidelines speakers will want to keep in mind when presenting to an Asian audience.

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Content Creation

Good content is good content anywhere in the world. Just as speakers organize their materials for an American audience, it's important that they focus on content organization for overseas presentation as well. The place to start is in Analyzing the Audience. While it's important that speakers analyze the audience when they're speaking in the U.S., this step is even more crucial when an international audience is involved. This is how speakers learn the specific nuances, requirements, and expectations of the audience so they can customize their approach for their listeners.

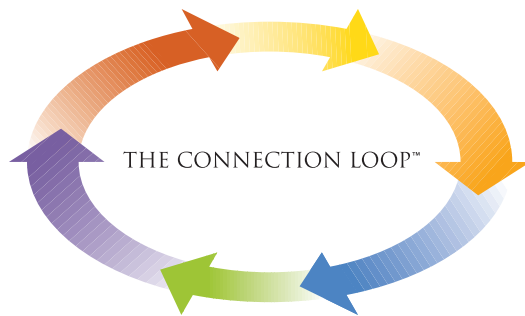
For example, when an American speaks to an Asian, the expectation is that business will be conducted the way it is conducted in America. American cultural influences, style, and behavior are an accepted way to do business. In other words, they don't expect the American to become Asian. However, they do expect the presentation to be well structured, with an opening, body, and close, and have a logical and thoughtful pattern.

During the presentation preparation phase, it's important to remember that many people think in their mother tongue and speak with the help of simultaneous translation. So even though the Asian audience members may speak English very well, if it's not their first language, they may get lost in the speaker's ideas if the concepts are not meticulously planned and well organized. It can be challenging to translate complex ideas into another language, so the goal is to make sure any central ideas come across easily.

Culture influences how people prefer to receive information and how interactive it should be. For an American audience, we teach that the presentation be lively and interactive. However, Asian audiences often want their presenters to be systematic and build to a clear point within their presentation—without the fanfare. But this doesn't mean American speakers should speak in a monotone, stand rigidly in one place, and not involve the audience; it simply means the speaker needs to take cues from the audience (just as we teach speakers to do when addressing any audience) and slightly modify his or her approach. In other words, it's okay to be moderately animated and interactive as long as the message systematically builds to one clear point.

Language Choices

The exact words and phrases used when presenting to an Asian audience are just as important as the words and phrases used for an American audience. Using stories, metaphors, facts, data, rhetorical questions, and other touch points are instrumental parts of a presentation, and they are always welcome in international presentations as well. Stories, anecdotes, and metaphors bring the message closer to the audience—everyone is appreciative of these techniques.



The key, however, is to be sensitive to cultural norms. Some stories and metaphors that are appropriate in the U.S. can be offensive in Asia. Therefore, avoid references to political or religious figures or events in the presentation, as most people are sensitive to these topics. Not all Asian countries are democracies, and not all come from a Christian perspective—or even have any religious affiliation at all. Likewise, stay away from references to sports not practiced in Asia, such as baseball or American football.

One thing we often stress during DeFinis Communications training is the avoidance of slang in a presentation. This

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is especially true when speaking to people in Asia, as they often won't understand American slang—even slang phrases that are considered universal in the States. For example, phrases such as “at the end of the day,” “barking up the wrong tree,” or “do this a.s.a.p.” may be confusing to Asian audiences. Realize, too, that speakers and instructors in Asia often have higher social standing than in the United States and are often viewed as figures of absolute authority. For this reason, jokes, casual phrases, and other informal language can create a sense of unease.

Delivery Skills

When delivering a presentation to an American audience, skills like gestures and eye contact are vital to build connection with the group. These delivery skills techniques are crucial in Asia too. But they must be modified.

In general, Asians find broad gestures distracting. Actions like pointing with the index finger, beckoning someone with the hand or index finger, making direct eye contact, and even pointing the feet at someone are considered rude. But there are ways around all these behaviors.


For example, rather than use the index finger to point to an audience member or point to indicate direction, speakers should use a fully extended hand or closed fist to “point.” Rather than make direct eye contact with individual audience members, speakers should sweep their gaze across the audience and not focus on any one person. And rather than sit in a way that exposes the soles of the shoes to someone or puts the speaker's feet too close to someone (such as sitting with legs crossed or with the ankle over the knee), it's better to sit on the edge of the chair with both feet planted firmly on the ground. Should the American's shoes or feet touch someone else, it's important to apologize immediately.

Above all else, don't forget to smile! That's one form of communication that is universal.

Reading the Audience

No matter who the audience is, it's important that the speaker continually read the audience to ensure he or she is connecting with them and that they understand the message. Should it be determined that people aren't following along, are confused, or are downright bored, it's imperative that the speaker adjust the presentation on the spot.

Reading an Asian audience is just as critical; however, it's important to be aware of the cultural differences that can make verbal and non-verbal cues have a different meaning than what they would have in the U.S. For example, most Asian cultures are concerned about "losing face." They don't want either party to feel embarrassed, as that would diminish each party's standing in the relationship. Therefore, when an Asian doesn't understand something due to language problems, he or she will often still say, "Yes, yes it is clear." People from a western background often have difficulties understanding this. Therefore, speakers will fare better if they rely on what they read from the listener's body language rather than take their words at face value.

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How Asian audiences respond to presentations is very different from a U.S. audience, too. In Japan, for example, it's common for people to show concentration and attentiveness by nodding their head up and down slightly and even closing their eyes occasionally. This doesn't mean they are falling asleep; it's actually how they show their involvement in the message.

Additionally, the response to humor varies greatly across different cultures. If a speaker chooses to make jokes or use humor in the presentation, it's important that they don't judge the humor's effectiveness by the number of laughs that erupt. In some Asian cultures, laughing aloud is a sign of nervousness and is not appreciated or displayed.

Finally, many presenters judge the effectiveness of their presentation based on the questions they receive during the Q&A session. When an American audience is engaged, they often ask challenging questions as a way to show their interest level. However, in many Asian cultures, audiences are more likely to greet a presentation with silence or just a few polite questions. This is not always indifference, but rather a show of respect. So if a presentation does not elicit questions, don't take it as disinterest.

Special Considerations for Each Country

Each Asian culture has its own unique nuances when it comes to presentation skill expectations. The following country-by-country guidelines will help Americans further adapt their presenting style so they can effectively connect with their audience and achieve success in every presentation they give.

For more detailed information about each culture's business etiquette, please see the following resources: <http://www.cyborlink.com/besite/> and <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/>. Click on the desired country to learn more information.

CHINA

1. The Chinese do not speak with their hands so do not use large hand movements. Your movements may be distracting to your audience.
2. If you must point, use an open palm. Do not point with your finger.
3. Rank is extremely important in business relationships. Keep rank differences in mind when communicating. Gender bias is nonexistent in business.
4. Never lose sight of the fact that communication is official, especially in dealing with someone of higher rank. Treating them too informally, especially in front of their peers, is not advised.
5. Meetings require patience. Mobile phones ring frequently and conversations tend to be boisterous. Never ask the Chinese to turn off their mobile phones as this causes you both to lose face.
6. Visual aids are useful in large meetings and should only be done with black type on white background. Be aware that colors have special meanings and if you are not careful, your color choice could work against you.
7. Presentations should be detailed and factual and focus on long-term benefits.

8. Chinese are non-confrontational. They will not overtly say “no”; they will say, “We’ll think about it” or “We’ll see.”
9. Under no circumstances should you become impatient or lose your temper or you will lose face and irrevocably damage your relationship.

JAPAN

1. Avoid using large hand gestures, unusual facial expressions, and any dramatic movements. The Japanese do not talk with their hands. Pointing is not acceptable.
2. Avoid the “OK” sign; in Japan it means money.
3. A smile can have double meaning. It can express either joy or displeasure. Use caution with your facial expressions. They can be easily misunderstood.
4. Understand that the Japanese prefer not to use the word “no.” If you ask a question, they may simply respond with a “yes” but clearly mean “no.”
5. Since the Japanese strive for harmony and are group dependent, they rely on facial expression, tone of voice and posture to tell them what someone feels. They trust non-verbal messages more than the spoken word, as words can have several meanings.
6. Most Japanese maintain an impassive expression when speaking. Some Japanese close their eyes when they want to listen intently.
7. It is considered disrespectful to stare into another person’s eyes, particularly those of a person who is senior to you because of age or status.
8. The Japanese are non-confrontational. They have a difficult time saying “no,” so you must be vigilant at observing their non-verbal communication. It is best to phrase questions so that they can answer “yes.” For example, “Do you disagree with this?”
9. The Japanese are comfortable with silence and often remain silent for long periods of time. Be patient and try to understand if your Japanese colleagues have understood what was said.
10. Never lose your temper or raise your voice during presentations, meetings, or negotiations.

TAIWAN

1. Taiwanese value a well-crafted message. Divide presentation topics into clearly defined segments. They appreciate sharing a deep and broad contextual understanding in order for the core message to be delivered and understood. That context comes in the form of words, gestures, and facial expressions.
2. Brevity is not particularly valued, especially if it sacrifices something in the delivery.
3. Meeting schedules are not highly structured in Taiwan. There may be an agenda, but it serves as a guideline for the discussion and may act as a springboard to other related business ideas.
4. Time is not considered more important than completing a meeting satisfactorily; therefore, meetings will continue until the discussion is completed and may extend well past a scheduled end time.
5. Subtlety is key. People in Taiwan are very indirect in their communication and are as concerned with the effect of their words on others as they are with the content of their communication.
6. They will gently push their ideas forward and wait for others to respond. If they disagree with an idea, they will simply remain silent.
7. Winking is inappropriate in any situation.
8. Do not touch another person’s shoulders.
9. Do not touch or point at anything with your feet, they are considered dirty.
10. Modify tone and volume as not to appear loud, harsh, or aggressive. Candor is not appreciated.

INDIA

1. Indians do not like to express “no,” be it verbally or non- verbally. Evasive refusals are more common, and are considered more polite. Never directly refuse an invitation. A vague “I’ll try” is an acceptable refusal.
2. Rather than disappoint you by saying “no,” Indians will offer you the response that they think you want to hear. This behavior should not be considered dishonest. An Indian would be considered terribly rude if he did not attempt to give a person what had been asked.
3. Indians prefer to do business with those they know. Relationships are built upon mutual trust and respect.

4. You should arrive at meetings on time since Indians are impressed with punctuality.
5. Always send a detailed agenda in advance. Send back-up materials, charts, and other data as well.
6. Indians are non-confrontational. It is rare for them to overtly disagree, although this is beginning to change in the managerial ranks.
7. If you lose your temper you lose face and prove you are unworthy of respect and trust.
8. Beckoning someone with the palm up and wagging one finger can be construed as an insult. Standing with your hands on your hips will be interpreted as an angry, aggressive post
9. Never point your feet at a person. Feet are considered unclean. If your shoes or feet touch another person, apologize.
4. Do not pound your fist on an open palm; it is an obscene gesture in Singapore.
5. Business in Singapore is more formal than in many western countries. There are strict rules of protocol that must be observed.
6. In order to keep others from losing face, much communication will be non-verbal and you must closely watch the facial expressions and body language of your audience.
7. Rank is always respected. The eldest person in the group is revered.
8. Most Singaporeans are soft-spoken and believe a calm demeanor is superior to a more aggressive style.
9. Since questioning authority is a taboo, it is important to encourage questions after making a presentation and then smile when a question is eventually asked.
10. Presentations should be accompanied by backup material, including charts and figures.

SINGAPORE

1. Singaporeans are group dependent and rely on facial expression, tone of voice, and posture to tell them what someone feels. They often trust non-verbal messages more than the spoken word. Silence is an important element of Singaporean communications. They tend to be subtle, indirect, and implicit in their communications.
2. Rather than say “no,” they might say, “I will try,” or “I’ll see what I can do.” This allows the person making the request and the person turning it down to save face and maintains harmony in their relationship.
3. Pausing before responding to a question indicates that they have given the question appropriate thought and considered their response carefully. They do not understand western culture’s ability to respond to a question hastily and think this indicates thoughtlessness and rude behavior.

Conclusion

Communication is at the core of global business success. For projects to be completed effectively, strategic initiatives to be implemented successfully, sales to increase substantially, and products to be developed regularly, delivering effective presentations within the organization—regardless of geographic location—is critical. Connecting with an international audience requires that speakers use the fundamental presentation principles and adapt them to the culture and norms of the country where they are presenting. Ultimately, by staying true to the core presentation skills taught by DeFinis Communications while showing respect for the host’s culture, speakers can deliver a presentation that will showcase their expertise, create connection with their audience, and achieve their business goals.



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Angela DeFinis, CEO/Founder
DeFinis Communications, Inc.
415.258.8176
adefinis@definiscommunications.com
www.definiscommunications.com

