How To Prepare for Client Interviews Like a Broadway Star

By Leslie Blaize, CPSM

What do engineers and architects have in common with Broadway actors? They both perform. And great performances lead to public acclaim and future work.

The decision to deliver a winning presentation at a client interview begins with the go/no-go decision. Ideally, a team goes after work with the odds stacked in their favor. Key players know the prospect and the proposed project. They've been following its development for months, if not years. They know the prospect's hot buttons and are researching potential solutions reflecting the latest technology.

Following this ideal scenario, how do you create a successful presentation? Here's a five-step process that will address client needs and build your team's performance confidence.

Step One: What's Your Purpose?

What's your production about? Actors get into the head of their characters. They want to deliver the playwright's message in an authentic performance.

In the same way, you need to understand the obvious and hidden motives of your clients. Address your prospect's presentation questions but go deeper. What are your differentiators that will seal the deal for your clients?

How can you address their specific pain points? Solutions could include the following:

- Your project team knows how to deal with unexpected obstacles
- Your construction staging plan will cut down on traffic delays for citizens
- You'll establish a process to communicate with stakeholders to answer concerns throughout the project

Have you researched the decision-makers? Do they have a technical background or are they public officials or appointees with various backgrounds?

Have others in your firm worked for this prospect, perhaps providing a service outside of your area? Take the time to listen to their insights—if they won or lost a previous job. They may even share queries posed by prospects during the Q&A session.

What's your main goal? Yes, you'll deliver a successful project. But you also want to make your clients look good. Their re-election or job security may depend on it.

Step Two: Select the Proper Cast

Pick the right professionals for the job. Typically, prospects want to meet the project manager and specialists.

A business development professional or firm leader may introduce the team, but they should have a minor role. Key subconsultants also may participate for a few slides to demonstrate how their expertise will enhance the project.

Celebrate connections. Look for team members who excel at public speaking—or who are willing to learn. They may be junior staff members who would bring an infectious enthusiasm to the presentation.

Step Three: Organize Your Talk

When you attend a play, attendees frequently check out the playbill to review the play synopsis, scenes, characters, and actor bios. Most plays follow a three-act structure. The audience meets the characters, a complication develops, and then it's resolved in act three.

In A/E/C client presentations, follow a similar format. Your judges meet you in person. They may have reviewed your résumé or LinkedIn profile in advance of the meeting. Then they wait to see how you'll describe their challenges and offer your proposed resolutions.

Begin your presentation by stating your purpose and offering a preview. Then clearly identify your prospect's hot buttons and show how you're qualified to resolve problems. Finally, sum up your approach and ask for the job.

West Texas A&M University, Cayon, TX. Kirksey Architecture. © G. Lyon Photography, glyonphotography.com.

During your presentation, look for ways to stand out. Consider successful plays. They may use period backgrounds or multimedia to help set the stage and add interest. How can you add local photos or other dramatic graphics to show your understanding of your prospect's challenges?

Step Four: Practice Your Presentation

The project team should expect to devote significant time preparing an engaging presentation. The marketing team schedules brainstorming sessions to review the client's hot buttons and practice sessions.

Smart firms insist on practices for all team members. Broadway actors practice alone and then with the full cast, often for weeks. Professional services personnel need to follow the same approach on a more limited scale. Seasoned personnel with only a few slides can assist the less experienced. And during the practice, the pros may discover new information about the project or client that will enhance their contributions.

Compare this process to a harried team forced to pursue work by a manager looking for a quick fix to declining revenue numbers. They've neglected standard marketing practices because the pipeline was full. Now it's not and they're grasping at straws. Unless team members find last-minute inspiration, the presentation probably will fall flat.

Even teams that expect to win projects neglect to practice presentations. Here are some standard excuses:

- I'm too busy with client work
- We'll do a run-through in the car on the way to the interview
- I only have two slides
- I'll practice on my own

And secretly, presenters may want to avoid practicing in front of their co-workers and looking foolish.

With practice, all presenters gain confidence that will be evident when it's showtime in front of prospects.

Step Five: Deliver With Confidence

Cast and crew know what to do before the curtain goes up on a Broadway play. Nothing is left to chance and all know how to handle an unexpected problem.

Professional services teams also need to prepare as much as possible.

The day before the big event, presenters should discuss what they'll wear. Typically, presenters select outfits that are one level above their audience.

Research the community so you're aware of landmarks, key news events, and winning sports teams. You may find an opportunity to connect with officials and establish rapport before or after your presentation.

When it's showtime, try to relax and let your personality and passion for your work shine through. You've practiced the presentation and you've come prepared with potential questions. At the end of your talk, reaffirm that you want to work with the prospective clients because you can solve their challenges.

After the presentation, take time to analyze results. Whatever happens, you've done your best. Use the lessons learned for continual improvement. And don't forget to celebrate your effort—no matter the outcome. ■