



*Make Every Communication Count™*

# Best Practices to Win High-Stakes "Finalist" Presentations

You survived sleepless nights responding to the RFP.

*And you just learned that you made the short list!*

Now your team has one shot to win the contract.

*The finalist presentation is where you will win or lose it all!*

The customer has opted to tell you nothing about the decision-making panelists, their mood, or the other finalists. The buyer group did provide a specific agenda for you to follow, along with strict limits on the time and the number of people allowed to present. Their instructions also restrict the number of slides you can use and require a minimum PowerPoint® font size!

It's all or nothing! Finalist presentations – sometimes known as finalist meetings, team interviews, bid interviews, orals, or “bake-offs” – are among the most high-stakes communication situations in business today.

By the time you make the short list, the customer knows you and your remaining competitors can do the work. In most cases, all finalists have already been evaluated and found capable.

At the finalist presentations, it is high on the buyers' priority list to decide which competing organization's *people* they want to work with. Your team – individually and collectively – will be under an intense spotlight.

**At the finals, both *what you say* and *how you say it* will be mission critical.**

Too often, finalist teams spend their preparation time and energy lost in the tactical weeds. Finalist presentation team members often get into a frenzy of creating binders and slides. In the rush and chaos, they forget how important it is to strategize and practice ways to connect and stay connected with the buyers during this all-or-nothing presentation.

**Finalist presentations require two types of “strategic” preparation to secure the best chance for a win: (1) STRUCTURED CONTENT PLANNING and (2) INTENSE PRACTICE.**

As the world leader in high-stakes finalist presentation preparation and delivery, Mandel Communications has identified best practices that can drive huge competitive advantages when it's time to stand and deliver at the finals.

You can create a strong positive differentiation for your finalist presentation based on how well your team performs – before, during, and after your presentation – at demonstrating the best practices learned the hard way by others.

Finalist presentations don't happen every day, but when they do, everything is on the line.



Give yourself every advantage you can. Devote significant time and energy to perfecting your team's performance in areas that can help you make the greatest positive impact possible.

## Best Practice Areas for Winning Finalist Presentations

- Establish Team Leadership and Responsibilities
- Research the Buyers
- Manage the Environment
- Start with "The Story"
- Practice to Attain Excellence
- Look and Act Like a Team
- Prepare for Q&A
- Learn from Each Experience

This whitepaper outlines some of the key activities and behaviors in each best practice area that can significantly increase your odds of a winning outcome.

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# Establish Team Leadership and Responsibilities

The selection of a team leader for your finalist presentation is “mission critical” to your success. The team leader is most likely the individual to whom the buyers have already granted some trust and credibility and with whom they have most fully shared their needs regarding the business situation.

When sales teams are presenting, the team leader is often, but not always, the most senior Account Executive or Relationship Manager. It’s critical, in any case, that the team leader be the customer’s central point of contact. That is the person on your team with whom the buyers will connect to communicate additional requests, concerns, questions, and/or objections after your finalist presentation has been delivered.

**The presentation team leader must understand the strategic elements and tactical essentials of successful team presentations.** He or she needs this level of understanding to ensure that the team’s depth of planning and practice generates the highest probability of a strong and successful presentation.

The team leader’s responsibilities include coordinating, gathering, and sharing insightful information about the buyers’ business, organization, and people. This leader also provides guidance to the team about the strategic and tactical situation, competitive advantages, and critical success factors. He or she sets clear, relevant presentation roles and objectives for everyone on the team and ensures that every team member has a clear understanding of the connections between the presenters’ topics and their relevance to the buyers’ needs.

As is true for all finalist presentation team members, the team leader also needs to be an accomplished presenter.

## Research the Buyers

You may not know the names, titles, roles, and responsibilities of all those who will attend the finalist presentation. If this is the case, meet with your team and others familiar with the buying organization to brainstorm *all* the possible players who might be there.

**Research the buyers at an organization level.** As you ramp up to your final presentation, visit the company’s website each day and check online news about the buying organization. Find out whatever you can about the current initiatives that the organization is deploying and the challenges it is facing. Determine how these issues affect and/or are affected by your proposal.

As late as the day of your presentation, you may learn something that suggests an advantage or shines a new light on points that will be addressed in your presentation.

**Research the buyers at the individual level.** Do a bit of sleuthing to learn more about each person in the buying organization who may attend. Check individuals out on LinkedIn, Google, Facebook, and other search engines and online communities. Ask questions of people who know them.

It's extremely helpful to know each potential audience member's business and educational background, where the person has previously lived and worked, and whether he or she has served on boards or charities, written articles, or given speeches to professional groups and on what subjects. You just might pick up a tidbit that helps you make an informed and thoughtful connection that tips the scales in your favor.

Also, when you see buyers' pictures in advance online, you are able to recognize individuals more quickly and will feel more comfortable using their names during the presentation.

Similarly, consider the potential impact of any pictures or statements posted on *your* organization's website or on your or your team members' social networking sites. The buyers are most likely researching you and your teammates before the meeting as well.

## Manage the Environment

**Create a checklist of standard questions that you want to ask the buyers' contact person as part of your preparation for every finalist presentation.** Include as many questions as possible about the environment in which you will be presenting. Ask your contact to describe the room and seating arrangements planned for your team's presentation.

Ask about the dress code. It is generally best to dress at the same level as, or slightly higher than, the buyers. You can always take off a jacket, coat, or tie if you are overdressed.

Ask what other organizations are being invited to present and when. Knowing which competitors you'll be up against and whether they are presenting before or after you will help you determine the kinds of questions the buyers may ask you during your presentation.

Sometimes the buyers will not tell you the other finalists' names, but they will often tell you where you are in the order of presentations. Even that small bit of knowledge can help.

Find out how many individuals will attend. Knowing how many people will be in the room and/or online can help you decide whether to project slides on a screen or work from a binder, as well as how many copies of your handouts to bring or send out beforehand. It is generally not advisable for the members of your team to outnumber those representing the buyer.

Wear nametags or have name tents for the table so that the buyers can get to know you and your team by name, even if *they* are not displaying their names.

If you can influence seating arrangements, position each team member strategically in the room. You may want to sit together to help the buyers see you as a cohesive team. On the other hand, if you choose to integrate your team with the buyer audience, place yourselves so that when not presenting, each team member who may need to interact with the buyers can do so naturally. Whether team members sit together or sit among those representing the buyers is a situational judgment call. Think it through carefully.

When presenting formally to larger audiences, you may want to position yourselves in chairs placed fairly close together, but “cheated out” a bit (at a slight angle) toward the audience. Only the current presenter or the person addressing a question should be standing. All other team members should be seated and remain highly attentive to the speaker, thus helping to keep the buyers’ attention on the team’s presenter.

As soon as you are seated, make a chart for yourself to show the seating arrangement of the individuals in the buyer group. Complete this during the introductions so you will know who’s who and can use people’s names easily and accurately.

## Start with “The Story”

The buyers want to hear about matters that *they* consider important. From their view (rightfully), it’s all about them and not about you. What you consider to be important is irrelevant to them unless you make the connections.

**They want to hear how you fit into THEIR story.**

Most presenter teams will nod their acceptance of this idea that customer-centricity is key. Unfortunately, their actual performance in front of buyers all too often shows exactly the opposite, and it severely hurts their chances.

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For over 19 years, the Association of Briefing Program Managers ([www.abpm.com](http://www.abpm.com)) has been conducting primary research about what is important to buyers when selecting a vendor in competitive presentation situations. Each and every year, the most frequent verbatim comments in the survey focus on this theme:

“We wish there had been more customization in the presentation.”

**Customers everywhere want your presentations to be more about them, and not about you.**

At the very least, look for ways to personalize your presentation (use the buyer’s logo, colors, brand, etc.) and take extra, noticeable steps toward customization. Can you align your presentation around a theme that is “top of mind” for the buyers? Can you demonstrate how *your* corporate values are compatible and supportive of *theirs*?

Such surface customization is better than nothing, but many times it only “meets minimum requirements” in the buyers’ judgment, particularly in highly competitive finalist bake-offs.

**The buyers’ desire for “customization” runs deep, and the presenter team that best satisfies that desire usually walks away with the prize.** Surprisingly for the other finalists, the prize is often won by an unlikely competitor who simply outthought the others and did a more creative job of addressing the buyers’ strong desire to see and hear the story presented from their perspective.

Even for front-runners going into the finals, a competitive loss often begins forming during the early steps of the preparation for their final presentation.

Habitually for some, the process of preparing for team presentations begins with each presenter independently opening a slide deck and performing a mental mind-dump.

Unfortunately, with the typical “more is always better” approach, it seems that every thought in the speaker’s head on the subject is being slammed into a series of text-heavy, bullet-point-driven slides. Or perhaps those thoughts and ideas are pushed into some canned slide deck with the hope that it will somehow fit this uniquely competitive situation.

Any customer-centric “story” that might have existed is totally obscured from the buyers by dense data, a lack of listener focus, and a rambling flow of uninspiring slides.

Then, too frequently and making matters worse, this speaker-centric content is delivered to the customer in a disjointed series of “talks” by different individuals focusing solely on their own narrow areas of expertise.

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Buyers are so accustomed to this typical speaker-centric approach that they have learned to bear with it . . . but they know a better approach when they see and hear it, even if they can't explain exactly what makes it better.

A better way – a much more engaging and high-impact approach – truly a “customized” approach – is to begin by creating a written, listener-centric content flow (or “Blueprint”® as we call it) of the story you want to tell. It should be a strong story that is driven along its path solely by the buyers’ unique situation, challenges and/or opportunities, and needs.

Then, based on that meaningful structure and comprehensible flow, create the speaker notes required to flesh out and tell that story verbally from the customer’s perspective.

Finally, create the slides that will precisely illustrate and support that story visually and will continually underscore your presentation’s overarching customer-centric themes.

This process helps you create an easy-to-follow, compelling, story-driven presentation that will set you apart from your competition.

## Three keys to creating a good story

**Use a proven storytelling framework.** One of the secrets that master communicators use to efficiently create engaging, results-producing communications is the application of a proven storytelling framework. The *Mandel Blueprint® System* excels as a highly effective tool for creating clear, compelling, story-form-based presentations. It supports many other critical communication applications as well, from preparing for high-stakes conversations and meetings to planning important voice mail and email messages.

You can use the *Mandel Blueprint®* to build each individual’s portion of the team presentation and then use it to link those individual sections together. The *Blueprint®* ensures that all team members’ individual presentations are each soundly constructed and then are tied together as a complete story that unfolds cohesively and convincingly for the buyers.

**Be audience centric.** Focus on what the buyers care about. Remember, it really isn’t *your* story you are presenting. It is your buyers’ story that you need to tell, including how you can enrich that story in significant, unique, and meaningful ways that are important to them. Leverage the research you have done on their needs, attitudes, and desires and then clearly connect everything with those issues. When you speak in the context of what buyers care about, they will stay engaged and track along with you.

**Never give the buyers more information than they actually need.** One of the hardest communication skills to develop is **content sacrifice**. That is the discipline *not to tell* in your presentation everything you know about your subject. It is difficult to resist the strong temptation to put every detail into your slide deck, just in case. In fact, though, it's far more effective to pick every point you make and every fact you share based on a *specific and important* buyer "care-about."

If you cannot connect a point or a piece of information to some issue that the buyers consider important, that is a strong case for leaving it out, no matter how interesting it is to you.

Equally important, when you answer questions that the buyers have specifically asked you to address in your presentation, clearly note the connection between that question and your answer so they will give you credit for it.

## Practice to Attain Excellence

True professionals know the value of practice and rehearsal. As Paul "Bear" Bryant, the most winning coach in football, said—

"It's not the will to win, but the will to *prepare* to win, that makes the difference."

World-class athletes and brilliant concert orchestras alike make practice a major part of their professional lives in order to perform at their peak. Practice and rehearsal are no less essential for everyone who participates in a high-stakes finalist presentation.

**Practice every word of your presentation *out loud*, on your feet, together as a team, until you get it perfect.** Don't just tell each other what you plan to do; do it – as if the buyers were in the room with you.

Practice how you will enter the room as a team, who each team member will seek out in order to make a special connection, and how you will handle the initial round of introductions. Although a handshake may seem trivial, it speaks volumes about your confidence. Every handshake should be firm and "gender-neutral." It's worth making sure that everyone on your team knows how to shake hands appropriately – so practice even that!

This preparation may take a few or many practices, a little time or a lot of time. No matter. What should matter is winning when it's time for you to stand and deliver.

Make sure that every presenter, and the team as a whole, displays clarity, confidence, competence, and passion. Arrange for in-the-moment rehearsal coaching by a skillful manager or a professional presentation coach.

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# Look and Act Like a Team

Decision makers consider your team interactions to be valuable previews of how your organization will treat them if they elect to do business with you.

Consider yourself “on stage” at all times during the finalist presentation. (And “on stage” means from the time that you set foot outside of your car, bus, or cab to enter the presentation location until the time you are miles away after the presentation, safely out of view and earshot.)

The buyers are not only evaluating your content, they are also watching and listening to see how each individual acts and how team members treat each other.

**Buyers will observe what you are doing even when you are not presenting.**

Avoid any appearance of disinterest in the customer or the current topic – do no other work and get into no side conversations with team members about non-related topics.

- NEVER check your laptop, cell phone, or PDA, even if you think no one will catch you or will care (someone surely will).
- Listen with interest to the content of every one of your colleagues, even if you have heard it a thousand times before.
- Periodically make eye contact with the buyers to check for expressions of interest, confusion, or other nonverbal signals.

If the buyers look disengaged or confused, you may want to interrupt the current presenter graciously to ask a question of the buyers or to link the presenter’s comments to a buyer care-about. (Be sure you have cleared this behavior and practiced it with all team presenters ahead of time. That way they will know why you are interrupting and understand you have the speaker’s best interests and the success of the team at heart.)

**The moments between the team’s presenters – the “white space” between topics – can be extremely important to the quality of the overall impression that your team makes during a finalist presentation.**

Practice these content transitions and presenter introductions with your team. If you say you are a team, be sure you come across as a team!

Smooth, value-added handoffs are the hallmarks of top presenter teams.

Mispronouncing a team member’s name during an introduction or Q&A period, or being unclear about the relevance of the content to be covered in the next team member’s presentation, will be a clear give-away to the buyers that you are just *playacting* and are not truly a team.

Refer to other team members in a positive, respectful, and friendly way. Be enthusiastic.

Smile and make eye contact with each speaker.

Each presenter should acknowledge an introduction by the team leader or other team member by saying, at least, "Thank you," or better yet, "Thanks, Jim. I'd like to pick up where Jim just left off by discussing the value of..."

Demonstrate pride when introducing or thanking your colleagues. Get the buying group excited about what's to come and who from your organization is in the room.

## The team leader's pivotal role

It is the team leader's responsibility to begin the overall presentation with a strong, customer-centric, well-rehearsed opening statement. (The *Mandel Blueprint*<sup>®</sup> will help you make this introduction engaging, concise, and focused on the issues most important to the buyers.)

The leader should also demonstrate support for the team by taking an active role throughout the entire presentation.

For example, team leaders should introduce each of the team presenters in a way that establishes the presenters' credibility and sets them up for success.

After each team member has presented, the team leader should take the opportunity to engage the buyers in a dialogue by asking "high-gain," open-ended questions to guide the team. This will help gauge the buyers' level of interest in the previous topic, uncover additional questions, and confirm that the topic has been covered to the buyers' satisfaction.

In addition, team leaders often deliver an appropriate portion of the presentation content, field questions along with others, as appropriate, and close the presentation with a strong summary and next steps.

# Prepare For Q&A

The Question and Answer session is often where the presenters' wheels fall off. From the buyers' perspective, your ability to handle difficult questions or challenges as a *team* says a lot about how you will handle implementation problems that may come up later if the buyers choose your company.

Brainstorm possible questions that the buyers might ask and decide who will handle each question if it comes up. You may choose to field questions on certain subjects individually or have the team leader facilitate the handoff of questions at the time.

Practice the answers to perfection. Particularly practice to perfection the answers to those questions that you wish the buyers would not ask, but that you know they will.

Have someone ask the questions just as the buyers would. In reply, actually say the answers *out loud, on your feet*, with clarity, confidence, credibility, and conviction – as if the buyers were with you in the rehearsal room.

**If you do not practice Q&A in rehearsals, you will practice your answers on presentation day in front of the buyers – when the stakes are highest and you have no opportunity for a do-over.**

Obviously, that is not a great idea.

# Learn From Each Experience

**Immediately after the finalist presentation, take time to debrief your presenters as a team.** What did we do well? What could we have done better? If you have been direct in giving each other feedback during the preparation process, it will be easy to continue doing so in the spirit of continuous improvement.

Your next presentation will be better because of this self-evaluation and feedback process.

Plan this feedback session into your presentation-day schedule, or set up a specific time slot for it on the day immediately following the presentation.

Whether you win or lose, ask the buyers why. When you learn the buyers' decision, ask for their insights regarding your presentation and its delivery. Their feedback will help enrich your next finalist presentation and put you more often in the winning column.

# An Important Last Thought about Human Nature

Remember, most people – when they can justify it – prefer to buy from people they like and who inspire their confidence.

Buyers may assess finalist presentations in part on key content issues, but usually the buyers also are making substantial decisions about *who* will be the best *people* to have working with their organization.

To be at your best, be thoroughly planned, prepared, and practiced as a team so you can be relaxed and engaged with the buyers during your finalist presentation. The buyers want to have confidence in you as people, and they are watching and listening for you to create that confidence for them.

If you follow the best practices identified in this Mandel whitepaper, you will be in a much stronger position to make your team and your organization the ones with whom the buyers will choose to do business.

If your finalist teams need to strengthen any aspect of planning or delivering their high-stakes presentations, please contact us. Mandel Communications' clients significantly improve their competitive results by employing the proven methodologies and expert coaching that we provide.

Please call Mandel Communications whenever we can help in any way.

**Much success to you!**

Sincerely,

*Your Mandel Training and Coaching Team*

## Contact

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# Other Useful References

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# About Mandel Communications

When the stakes are high, the quality of what you say and how you say it can make all the difference.

Every day, worldwide, organizations are turning their people's communication skills into a strong competitive advantage through Mandel's training, skills-building practice, and expert feedback.

Call on Mandel Communications whenever your organization needs to:

## 1. Build the Skills to Improve High-Stakes Presentation Results

- Sales Presentations
- Customer Briefings
- Presenting Ideas at the Executive Level
- Technical Presentations
- Executive and Manager Communications

## 2. Build the Skills to Sell Effectively at Executive Levels

## 3. Develop Trusted Advisor Relationships

Working with Mandel, you will gain a unique combination of demonstrable benefits:

- **Rapid skill improvements that can make the winning difference.** Mandel-trained professionals, managers, and executives can quickly create content and messaging that are listener-centric, clear, and compelling. Equally important, your communicators' personal "presence" will become increasingly "real," reassuringly confident, credible, and interactive.
- **Job performance improvements whenever masterful spoken communication skills are a key requirement for business success.** We will precisely tailor all that we do for you to achieve your organization's unique business goals, and our skills-building processes and tools will concentrate directly on producing your desired on-the-job results.
- **Global skill-building scalability.** To align with our client organizations' global activities, Mandel has expert trainers and coaches located throughout Europe, AsiaPac, India, and North America, and we build new communication skills in fourteen (14) different languages.
- **Face-to-face and virtual delivery options.** Clients consistently evaluate Mandel's face-to-face group training workshops and coaching services as world class in all aspects. Equally impressive are our capabilities to use digital delivery media - such as virtual meetings, virtual collaboration platforms, and TELEPRESENCE - to create outstanding skill-building results for you when face-to-face work is not the best option.

Please contact us whenever a significant improvement in spoken communication results could benefit your business performance. It would be our privilege to discuss these benefits with you.